

choice

EC 2009/JAN 2010 • WWW.CHOICE.COM.AU



Big day, big \$\$

Our shadow shop uncovers how prices go up and up when 'wedding' is mentioned.



Summer swims

CHOICE's big user trial identifies the best goggles at the very best prices.

On test

Camcorders
Home theatre systems
Motor vehicle GPS
Hooded barbecues
Cooking gadgets
Eskies
Children's bikes
Heart rate monitors

GOODY BASKET

27 Great Christmas presents from CHOICE

PLUS

Trolley wars – does Aldi win again?

Sparkling wines: best bargains, worst rip-offs

Ground coffee: which brand is a Green Buy?

Active and fit – 10 health myths debunked

Great outdoors – eskies and barbecues on test



204 PRODUCTS
RATED!

First Look: Choc fountains, coffee roasters, Amazon Kindle

COMMENT

Make the right CHOICE at Christmas



In our last editorial I talked about the pressure CHOICE members were placing on Telstra to drop its \$2.20 charge for paying bills in cash. I'm delighted to say the two-month campaign has paid off, with Telstra now agreeing to drop the charge. Telstra has shown leadership being the first telco to drop this charge, and we will keep up the pressure on others to do the same. This is a victory for members and shows what we can achieve when we work together.

With Christmas approaching, we will be launching a campaign to help you get a better deal on warranties and guarantees. There's a lot of consumer and retailer confusion around when products break down or don't do what is reasonably expected. In fact, consumers in most states and territories have strong warranty rights – they're entitled to repairs, replacements or refunds when goods and services they buy are not of acceptable quality. Many consumers tell us that retailers make it difficult for them to get what they're entitled to. We're calling on retailers to sign up to a Charter of Consumer Warranty Rights. We've also put a number of free tools on our website to help you assert your rights – see www.choice.com.au/warranties for more.

Christmas is a busy time for everyone, and CHOICE is seeking to take away the hassle with some great gift solutions. The first is to encourage you to buy a gift subscription to CHOICE, and in return we'll extend your membership from 12 months to 15 for free – please see page 66 for more information.

The second is to give you a free Christmas buying guide by calling 1300 807 560. The booklet contains 24 CHOICE top buys (so you can be sure you're getting real value for money) in eight gift categories, as well as information about great shopping websites for Christmas gifts and helpful tips on getting a bargain.

Every cent we make at CHOICE goes into unlocking the power of consumers, and our focus has never been clearer – we want Australians to be the most savvy and active consumers in the world. To do this we need your support, and in return we resolve to relentlessly deliver on what you want. It's why you have a direct line to me as CEO; it's why we regularly send you surveys on how we can improve the magazine and the investigative reports we publish; it's why we want you to come and visit us in Sydney and take a tour around our labs.

Please call the number below to speak to me or book your place on a lab tour.

A Merry Christmas from all of us at CHOICE.

Nick Stace, CEO
Phone 1800 266 786

Telstra's decision to drop its charge for paying bills in cash is a victory for CHOICE members and shows what we can achieve working together.

CHOICE. MAKE THE RIGHT ONE.

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. We pay full price for the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry.

We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is funded by subscriptions to our magazines, to www.choice.com.au and from other services we supply for the benefit of consumers, such as CHOICE Switch.

CHOICE product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. CHOICE staff also research a wide range of consumer services. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

SUBSCRIBE CHOICE Plus personal; \$32 per quarter for magazine and full online access: **CHOICE** personal subscription: one year \$82, two years \$153; Company/institution: one year \$132, two years \$253. **ONLINE membership** \$21.95 per quarter.

CHOICE COMPUTER personal subscription: One year \$42, two years \$80 for CHOICE subscribers (usually \$48/\$92); Company/institution: one year \$78, two years \$146. **SUBSCRIPTION AND RENEWAL** Call 1800 069 552.

SUBSCRIBERS' HELPLINE Call 02 9577 3399 or email us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au. **CHOICE EXTRA** Free website, www.choiceextra.com.au, for magazine subscribers with an index of articles from Jan/Feb 2002, plus links to PDFs.



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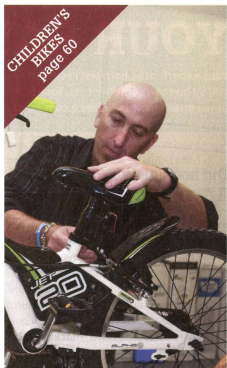
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Get more out of your exercise.

Your say – Online

CHOICE'S NEW WEBSITE allows all our online members to have their say on the reports we publish daily, as well as ask questions about specific product tests - from dishwashers and air conditioners to mayonnaise and mineral foundations. The questions go straight to the content producer, who will shoot back an answer in record time. It's no surprise that the story most commented on in October was the **CHOICE Shonky Awards**, which got a lot of media air-time, followed by our air conditioner test, just in time for the warmer weather. Here are the highlights of what members are talking about on www.choice.com.au, and how we're responding.

CHOICE 2009 Shonky Awards

Timothy Fuller's question:

"Hear hear for Qantas and its \$7.70 credit card surcharge - I'm guessing that it is legal but it there any other method of paying to avoid this fee?"



Karina Bray, journalist | Good question, Timothy. You can actually avoid fees by using BPAY or Debit Mastercard. According to Qantas' website, for fee-free flight bookings pay by BPAY a week or longer from departure, or by Debit MasterCard within a week of departure.

Air conditioners on test

Louise Dimoska's question:

"Why were these chosen? Are they the most purchased?"

Chris Barnes, content producer | We look for current, previously untested models in a certain cooling and heating capacity range. We don't have accurate enough market data to select only the most popular models, although we do try to select popular models based on information given to us by manufacturers. Not all manufacturers will share this information with us, which is understandable.

Cockroach killers on test

Paul Herrmann's suggestion:

"Great to know that the poison lasts for three to six months - our children will love it! Who wouldn't rather have a poisoned child than a dead cockroach? A safety warning about the practice of using these sprays would have been appropriate."



Matthew Steen, content producer | Thanks for your comments and suggestion. We will be adding a new page to this article, emphasising some of the warnings around toxins in pesticides. Prevention is the best option rather than using these types of chemicals in the home.

Mineral foundations user trial

Maureen Chapman's question:

"I've been using mineral makeup since the early 80s (started young!) and have always used the product now marketed as Sheer Cover. I've found it terrific, but wonder how I find out if it contains nanoparticles - and if anyone knows much about how 'natural' it really is?"

Kate Browne, journalist | Currently, there aren't any regulations in Australia requiring nanoparticles to be listed on the packaging. The best option is to contact the manufacturers or importers of the product directly and ask. Most will

be able to tell you straight away, or at the very least get back to you later with an answer.

We contacted all the manufacturers of the brands we trialled for this article to ask if they use nanoparticles, and found them pretty helpful. It's definitely worth checking out - let us know if you have any luck.

TiVo review

Anthony Preston's question:

"I would have liked more detail on the scheduling issues. Is the EPG for the TiVo correct for Channel Seven? They are forever bad at keeping to a schedule and as such fail to start or end on time. Does the TiVo keep up to date with Seven's bad scheduling?"



Chris Ruggles, content producer | Sadly, none of the free-to-air networks nor the companies that aggregate their data seem to have worked out how to provide an error-free service for EPGs. Our experience with the TiVo is that it will

pick up major changes, but only if the networks provide the changes in time. The current solution with any DVR is to "pad" the time at the beginning and end, and most have a facility for adding time globally.



FOOD LABELLING REVIEW

Threat or opportunity? Time and action will tell

Take action and complete our survey on food labels – they're important to you.

In October 2009, a new review of Australia's food labelling laws and policies was announced. This is an opportunity to provide consumers with better information about the food we all eat – but it also threatens the information Australians now take for granted.

The food labelling review was set up by the Commonwealth of Australian Governments' Business Regulation and Competition Working Group to reduce regulatory burden on businesses. Some food manufacturers view food labelling laws as a burden, but they're a vital ingredient in helping us make healthy and informed choices about what we eat.

CHOICE has successfully campaigned for nutrition information panels, detailed ingredient lists, country-of-origin labelling and labelling of genetically modified (GM) foods. We can now all see what's in our food, how healthy it is, and how and where it's produced.

There's always room for improvement – red, green and orange traffic light labelling would help us make healthy choices quickly; health claims regulation would stop unhealthy foods advertising dubious health benefits; and loopholes in GM labelling laws should be closed. But we also need to protect the important food labelling information we already have.

Food regulation – including labelling laws – is designed to protect public health and safety, provide consumer information and prevent misleading conduct. This review must not sacrifice the health and other interests of consumers in favour of watered-down food labelling laws or weaker industry codes that might suit some manufacturers in the food industry.

CHOICE will fight for food labels that Australians can trust. This means keeping the labelling that's important to you, improving things that aren't working and adding helpful new information. Please take action by completing our short food labelling survey at www.choice.com.au/foodlabelsurvey and have your say about this really important issue.

PRODUCT WARRANTIES

Warranties working for you

Is your retailer offering you a fair deal?

When we buy products, we expect them to work – and for a reasonable time. Some products come with manufacturers' warranties for this; others don't.

What many shoppers don't realise is that, regardless of what the retailer or manufacturer offers, all customers are legally protected by a warranty for faulty goods. Fair trading laws require retailers to repair or replace all faulty goods, or to provide a refund.

The number of shoppers reporting pressure to take out extended warranties, especially on whitegoods, computers and telecommunications products is on the rise (see Do You Want an Extended Warranty with That?, CHOICE December 2008/January 2009). Here at CHOICE, we're hearing about retailers refusing to repair, replace or offer a refund for goods that don't work as they should. Some retailers are even trying to dodge their obligations by telling customers to take their problem to the manufacturer.

Join CHOICE's campaign to protect your warranty rights

We've launched a campaign to improve retailer practices. Our Fair Warranty Charter sets out the warranty rights that Australian consumers should expect when purchasing goods and services. We're encouraging leading retailers, including Harvey Norman and JB Hi-Fi, to sign up. Check out our website (top right) to see who is on board, and help us by taking part in our online poll about retailers who haven't yet signed up but should.



CHOICE ONLINE

Find out more about making warranties work for you at www.choice.com.au/warranties.

There's a summary of your warranty rights; a "script" to help you make over-the-phone complaints to retailers; and template letters to send to retailers about faulty goods.

REMEMBER YOUR RIGHTS
Clip and keep this card, or go online to receive your summary via SMS.

choice

Have you bought something that doesn't work properly or has broken down?

DID YOU KNOW that Australian law gives you the right to go to the retailer and choose a refund, repair or replacement? This applies even if you don't have a manufacturer's or extended warranty.

➤ HEALTH

Ginkgo biloba cover-up

The TGA knows there are dodgy ginkgo biloba products on the market, but won't let consumers know which ones.

The ginkgo biloba herb may be useful for improving cognitive function and relieving symptoms of peripheral vascular disease, but due to variations in the ingredients – a problem common to many herbal medicines – not all ginkgo biloba preparations are equally effective.

Suppliers of cheap ginkgo use only a little genuine leaf extract and then adulterate it with cheaper sources of flavonoids, such as rutin (from buckwheat). This tricks standard tests that look only at the total amount of flavonoids present, not ginkgo specifically. Independent tests in the US concluded that ginkgo is among the most adulterated herbs.

In 2008, prominent public health advocate, Dr Ken Harvey, a former CHOICE Board member with a particular interest in regulatory matters, asked the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) if it had tested ginkgo products available in Australia. The regulator then tested a sample of 20 products containing ginkgo biloba, and found six had results consistent with adulteration. However, it didn't name the 20 products tested – or the six adulterated products.

Dr Harvey applied to obtain the results under the Freedom of Information Act. He argued this was in the public

interest because it would ensure people weren't buying products likely to be ineffective and could instead choose products that contain precisely what they claim. The TGA refused to provide information on the basis it may harm the commercial interests of the companies selling adulterated products. It would seem the TGA is more concerned about protecting commercial interests of the companies it's supposed to be regulating, than protecting the health – and pockets – of the general public.

It's not surprising, given that the TGA had its fingers burnt in the Pan Pharmaceutical full-out: the government settled for \$55 million in damages after the TGA's 2003 recall. Despite being found guilty of supplying dangerous products, Pan founder Jim Selim claimed against the regulator for a breach of duty of care and abusing public powers. This has opened the floodgates to a class action, with 165 litigants seeking a further \$120 million compensation from the government.

Law academic, Associate Professor Thomas Faunce, believes the TGA had a strong case against Pan and shouldn't have settled, and that this set an

unfortunate precedent. Consequently, the regulator may be more reticent to publicly discredit companies doing the wrong thing, even when it's in the public interest.

The TGA now seems to prefer to work quietly with companies, asking them to cooperate by cleaning up their act. While this approach hasn't been particularly successful to date – perhaps because the TGA is a fee-for-service government agency – it seems there's little alternative under the current regulatory regime.

The TGA argues the products are not unsafe, and people won't be harmed. In addition, the TGA has told sponsors of existing ginkgo products that from January 2010 they must comply with an additional test that will pick up adulteration. So, if you're tempted to try ginkgo biloba, or you're willing to try it again having been disappointed in the past, you'd do well to wait; for now, consumers have no idea whether the ginkgo products they have purchased are true to label. **KARINA BRAY**



For more information go to www.choice.com.au/warranties or call your local consumer protection body on:

ACT: (02) 6207 0400
NSW: 13 32 20 or (02) 8995 0111
NT: 1800 019 319 or (08) 8999 1999
QLD: 13 13 04 or (07) 3405 0970
SA: (08) 8204 9777
TAS: 1300 654 499 or (03) 6233 4567
VIC: 1300 558 181
WA: 1300 136 237 or (08) 9282 0777

(back of WARRANTIES cut-out-and-keep card)

CLARIFICATION: STROLLER TEST

On page 61 of CHOICE, November 2009, we said the Chariot trailer/stroller lacks the mandatory wrist tether strap. In fact, it does have one; it is tucked into a rear pocket. However, the strap lacks the required warning label, and at 80cm is too long. The distributor told us current models should have the warning label on the strap, and red brake pedals. They also said the strap is the correct length for use while jogging. If you buy one, check the rear pockets if the strap isn't immediately obvious and be sure to use it when using the Chariot in stroller mode.

+ COCKROACH KILLERS

Cockroach killers update

Do 'long-lasting' surface sprays live up to their name?

In our recent test of cockroach killers (CHOICE, October 2009) we promised to report on the effectiveness of surface sprays claiming to last between three and six months. Our results, below, indicate a few changes in the top-rating products, but nothing too surprising.

As we've previously stated, surface sprays are more likely to kill the smaller German cockroaches for longer.

A rolled-up newspaper or thong may be more effective on the larger American cockroaches. Preventative measures are likely to work effectively on all cockroach species.

Log on to www.choice.com.au/cockroach to find out more about active ingredients and other information. **MATTHEW STEEN**



PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE		
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (% initial / 3 months)	American cockroaches (% initial / 3 months)	German cockroaches (% initial / 3 months)
SURFACE SPRAY			
Baygon Do-It-Yourself Indoor Expert Home Surface Spray	100/100	100/100	100/100
Mortein Do-It-Yourself Professional Indoor Surface Spray	100/100	100/100	100/100
Atlas High Performance Surface Spray	100/98	100/97	100/100
Brunnings Ant and Termite Spider, Cockroach Killer	98/95	97/93	100/97
Coles Smartbuy Surface Spray Low Irritant	90/95	83/90	97/100
Baygon High Performance Egg Kill Crawling Insect Surface Spray	87/95	97/97	77/93
Atlas Crawling Insect Surface Spray	98/87	97/73	100/100
Crawly Cruncher Household Insecticide/Surface Spray	92/55	83/37	100/73
Hovex 2 in 1 Outdoor & Indoor Surface Spray	80/53	70/27	90/80

+ FOOD

Not so virginal

Some olive oils are not genuinely 'extra virgin' as labelled.

An investigation by the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) of a selection of imported and locally produced olive oils labelled "extra virgin" – for which we pay a premium – has found three do not meet the definition.

The regulator commissioned its own tests after receiving information that a number of oils sold in Australia as "extra virgin" may have been refined, adulterated with other oils (such as cheaper canola or rapeseed oil) or of poor quality. It found three of the tested samples – Isabella Extra Virgin (sold through IGA supermarkets), Paese Mio Organic Extra Virgin (supplied through Coles) and Aigeon 100% Extra Virgin (sold through continental delis and restaurants) – were not extra virgin olive oil as defined by the International Olive Council (IOC).

Although there's currently no mandatory standard, the IOC's trade standard for olive oil defines "extra virgin" and sets criteria for purity and quality, and is deemed a useful and recognised guide for establishing the essential elements of genuine extra virgin olive oil.

As a result of the investigation, the relevant importers and retailers have agreed to undertake more testing to demonstrate their products' compliance with the IOC standards before supplying batches of oil labelled olive, virgin or extra virgin olive oil, and to ensure they don't contravene the Trade Practices Act. ACCC chairman Graeme Samuel has

warned: "Each company in the supply chain can be held to account for false, misleading and deceptive conduct, so I suggest all Australian suppliers of extra virgin olive oil have in place adequate processes so they can be certain that the claims they make about products they sell are accurate and truthful."

Paul Miller, president of industry body Australian Olive Association (AOA), welcomed the ACCC's action as "a direct result of the AOA's proactive stance on identifying incorrectly labelled olive oil". The AOA has its own Code of Practice, which aims to provide consumers with confidence that signatories have undergone rigorous procedures to certify their products meet the highest industry standards. To be certified under the code, products must be Australian and undergo organoleptic (taste) and chemical testing. There are currently 65 signatories, and in August ALDI was the first retailer to sign up. Certified products can be identified by the Certified Australian Extra Virgin logo (above).

Previous independent analysis of more than 100 brands of olive oil found more than half of those sold as extra virgin in Australia is below standard. Imported oils are the worst offenders, with a failure rate of more than 80%. Just under a quarter of local brands tested failed for being too old. **RACHEL CLEMONS**



+ CONSUMER CREDIT

Overdrawn check

CHOICE is concerned about proposed legislative changes that will allow lenders to see consumers' credit history in more detail.

Lenders will have access to more information on individual credit histories under significant changes proposed by the federal government.

The government has indicated it will soon adopt most of the recommendations flagged by the Australian Law Reform Commission in August 2008 to change privacy laws. These include giving lending institutions access to information such as how many loans a consumer has, the amount borrowed and information about late payments.

Consumer groups have welcomed aspects of the government's proposed reforms, such as the capacity for better customer complaint handling. However, Consumer Action co-CEO, Carolyn Bond, believes the reforms could have a risky downside.

"Given credit marketing and selling practices, it is likely this information will lead to an increase in overall lending, which by its nature means an increase in the number of people falling into credit difficulties," she says. "In the US where lenders have had access to much more information on people's credit reports for many years, it's pretty clear lending practices have been far more reckless than in Australia."

Currently, lenders can access consumers' applications for credit for the past five years as well as any defaults, court judgments and bankruptcies. CHOICE wants to know what you think about these changes to determine what action we should take – go to www.choice.com.au/creditchanges to take part in our poll.

PETA YOSHINAGA

+ ONLINE SCAMS

Counting the cost of scams

As the number of people exposed to fraud escalates, so too does the cost to victims.

A staggering 80% of consumers have been exposed to an email scam in the previous 12 months, according to the Australian Institute of Criminology.

The AIC's online fraud survey of almost 1000 people also found 20% of respondents have responded positively to a scam invitation – and about half of all victims of credit or bank card fraud lost between \$1 and \$500 to a scam.

The most common scams to obtain personal or banking details include lotteries that offer a nonexistent prize, requesting bank account details for a money transfer, upfront payment or inheritance, and work-from-home scams.

Victims of personal fraud lost almost \$1 billion in 2007, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). In the largest fraud survey to date, the ABS found more than 800,000 people were victims of

personal fraud in which they requested more information, or supplied personal information or money in relation to a scam invitation.

Social networking sites and the internet also pose a hidden threat, especially for young people. Authorities warn they are inadvertently exposing themselves to future identity theft by publishing personal details today. The information can be harvested by criminals now and used years later in phishing scams once they are adults.

To help protect internet users, Microsoft search site Bing is now publishing scam warnings on www.bing.com – search for 'scams'. Microsoft is also collaborating with US authorities, who recently smashed a huge phishing network that included the US and Egypt, to warn consumers about scams and remind them of safe online habits. ROSALYN PAGE



IN BRIEF

Aspirin combats colon cancer

A 600mg dose of aspirin daily could halve the chance of people with a genetic predisposition to colon cancer developing the disease, according to new UK research. Professor John Burn of Newcastle University believes aspirin may affect the survival of abnormal stem cells in the colon.

Wellbeing of our kids

Australian children of all ages are eating the wrong foods and become less active as they get older, according to the National Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey. This is where the recently published, evidence-based CSIRO *Wellbeing Plan for Kids* comes in. It provides information for parents on nutrition and activity for children, from toddlers to teenagers (www.csiro.au).

Soy doesn't prevent bone loss

It's been suggested menopausal women who regularly consume soy products have fewer hot flashes and a lower risk of developing heart disease and osteoporosis. However, researchers at the University of Connecticut, who conducted a small study on the effects of soy protein and isoflavone supplements on women over age 60, concluded they don't prevent bone loss.

+ HAGGLING

Haggle till it hurts

CHOICE outlines some tips on refining the lost art of haggling.

With many feeling the pinch of the global downturn, shoppers want to stretch their dollars further. Nowadays, most people can access the internet, where some great savings can be made on pretty much anything. With Christmas approaching, finding gifts for everyone can be an expensive exercise – and if you're not a fan of online shopping, a trip to the shops will top the 'to do' list. To get the most out of your Christmas fund this year, try your hand at a little haggling.

Haggling is a skill that can save you money on a whole range of items, but bear in mind it's a process, and not all retailers will want to enter into "bargain banter" with you. While it's always worthwhile asking if a product can be reduced, major department stores and multinational retailers often have fixed prices from which sale staff can't deviate.

But don't let this deter you. Instead, before hitting the shops to buy, research your product pricing and identify the best places to try out your haggling skills. Sellers at markets and owner-operated stores will often be more flexible with their sell price and be more open to reducing cost for bulk or cash sales.

Also, watch out for specials on Christmas-related fare a day or so before the 25th – and if you're doing a little last-minute shopping on Christmas Eve, keep an eye out for early Boxing Day markdowns.

Top 5 haggling tips

Haggling doesn't come naturally to everyone, but here are some ideas that may make it easier for would-be hagglers.

1. Research an item before you start to haggle. It's always handy to know prices at different stores so you can reason retailers down by saying you could get it cheaper elsewhere
2. Set yourself a price and stick to it. If negotiations go over this price, walk away.
3. Start with the question, "What's your best price?" Don't reveal what you can afford too early, as this reduces your bargaining power.
4. If you can pay with cash, pull it out and ask, "How much for cash?" This may help lower or settle a price you've been having problems coming to an agreement with. After getting a response, you can always ask if a senior's discount is applicable.



5. Ask how much the price will be if you add more items to your purchase. You may be able to get two or more items at a pretty good discount.

Below are a couple more ways to save money – they're services that can do all the buying and haggling on your behalf.

CHOICE Shopper

If you're a CHOICE Online member, you can use our CHOICE Shopper service for all products over \$100, including electrical appliances, cameras, home entertainment, printers, cars and computers. You'll need your subscriber number, the model name and number, and the price you want to beat – and we'll try to deliver that deal to the best of our ability. For more information, call 1300 360 655 or go to www.choice.com.au/CHOICE-Shopper.

Senior Shopper

If you hold a seniors card in NSW, Victoria, Queensland or the ACT, this service does the bargaining for you. It's free and can help you get the best deal on a whole range of items, with cardholders saving between 9% - 13% off their best price. See below for more information, or visit www.seniorshopper.com.au.

PETA YOSHINAGA & HANNAH GREW

Haggling is a skill that can save you money on a whole range of items – but it doesn't come naturally to all people.



+ COFFEE ROASTERS

The freshest brew

Create a range of blends at home with your own coffee roaster.

As well as grinding your own coffee beans, roasting them yourself is another key step in making a perfect cup of coffee at home. CHOICE put three coffee roasters to the test and found they vary greatly in performance and ease of use.

Gene Café This model has a maximum capacity of 300g per roast but, at 5.5kg is large to store. Its roasting guide is easy to follow, it has good visibility through the chamber and performs very well across the range of roast profiles. Overall, it's very easy



GENE CAFÉ COFFEE BEAN ROASTER CBR-101

Price \$745

Contact www.dibartoli.com.au



HOTTOP COFFEE ROASTER KN-8828B

Price \$1650

Contact www.dibartoli.com.au



to use, particularly when adjusting time and temperature. However, care must be taken when inserting the roasting chamber to ensure it's properly aligned.

Hottop recommends 250g per roast, and of the three models is the most expensive and the heaviest, at 10kg. It has time and temperature settings, as well as heated power and fan speed settings, which give you better control over the roast. It has one pre-programmed setting, three programmable settings and comes with a useful roasting guide. Its only disadvantage is cleaning, which is slightly more complex than the other two models.

The **iRoast** only has a maximum capacity of 150g, and while lightweight and compact for easy storage, it's very noisy during operation. It has two pre-programmed and



IROAST HOME ROASTER

Price \$380

Contact www.dibartoli.com.au

NOT RECOMMENDED

10 programmable settings, but the temperature can't be controlled adequately and rises dramatically, reaching 180°C in one minute, causing the coffee to burn quickly on the outside, without being fully roasted on the inside.

Buying **Vittoria Oro** pre-roasted coffee beans at \$32/kg and making 30 cups of coffee per week will cost you about \$320 per year, whereas buying green beans at \$14/kg and roasting them yourself would cost only about \$175/year (not including the purchase price of the roaster).

CHOICE VERDICT

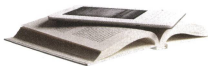
The freshest coffee comes at a price.

However, for coffee aficionados, the Hottop is a worthwhile investment and so is the Gene Café at half the price. **REBECCA GATTO**

+ EBOOK READER

Library in your hands

Amazon is kindling interest in electronic books.



How would you like almost any book you choose delivered in 60 seconds? The Kindle ebook reader uses electronic ink to provide crisp, clear text on a non-backlit six-inch monochrome screen that's easy to read, even in full sunlight. There's no touchscreen control, but navigation buttons on both sides and a small five-way joystick let you page through a book or skip to any part quickly.

The Kindle uses a 3G wireless connection to the Amazon online store to

buy books and download them directly to the device for a flat fee. The drawback is that you can only purchase books from Amazon.com – and due to publisher restrictions, Australia doesn't have access to Amazon's full ebook range. However, Amazon says more than 280,000 ebook titles are available, along with overseas newspapers and magazines. Bestsellers cost about \$12.

The Kindle itself can only be purchased online directly from www.amazon.com via a special page for Australian buyers, but

AMAZON KINDLE

Price \$US259

Contact www.amazon.com



this version only comes with a USB cable for charging from a PC, and you can't use it with USB-AC adapters such as those that come with the iPhone.

CHOICE VERDICT

With a Kindle by your side, your personal library can be a constant companion, but your choice is limited. For more on the Amazon Kindle, see the Jan/Feb 2010 issue of *CHOICE Computer*. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 (toll-free) or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines. **STEVE DUNCOMBE**

COMING

Set-top boxes

With analog television soon to become a thing of the past, a digital set-top box may be a cheaper and easier option for many viewers than buying a brand new TV. We find out what improvements, if any, have been made since our last test.



Pressure cleaners

These high-powered cleaners are great for outdoor jobs such as stripping unwanted paint or moss off hard surfaces. But are they a CHOICE Green Buy given a nationwide drought and heavy water restrictions? Our results may surprise you.



Handheld mixers

The days of sprained wrists are gone – these machines whip, whisk, beat and cream with an easy press of a button, without taking up all the space of a bench top mixer. We tell you which are best for your kitchen jobs, as well as which are quietest, easiest to use and easiest to clean.

Hiring a chocolate fountain for special occasions may be a more practical alternative to buying one of these machines.

+ CHOCOLATE FOUNTAINS

Sweet entertainment

These chocolate fountains are better in theory than in practice.

If you're entertaining over the Christmas holidays or for any other special occasion, chocolate fountains promise to be a focal point for your guests. Surround it with a variety of fresh fruit and treats, and you're sure to have a great party-starter. Or are you?

In our test of two chocolate fountains, CHOICE found consistency of the chocolate can be a big drawback. Chocolate with high cocoa content is recommended, but if low cocoa chocolate is used, adding vegetable or canola oil is supposed to help give a consistent flow. Following the Sunbeam's instructions, our tester, Fiona Mair, added 1kg of dark chocolate and a total of 250mL of canola oil, but the flow was too thin and slightly uneven. Adding the right amount of oil isn't easy, not to mention off-putting.

For the Liquid Chocolate fountain, Fiona added its specialised chocolate and achieved a perfectly flowing sheet. Using this type of chocolate is recommended as no extra oil is required.

Chocolate should be melted at an initial temperature of 50°C–60°C before being poured into the preheated machine.

Both fountains are easy to assemble and use, however the Sunbeam is noisier than the Liquid Chocolate. Don't let any fruit or sweets fall into the bowl, as they can



LIQUID CHOCOLATE FONDUE FOUNTAIN CFF-2008B

Price \$79

[Liquid chocolate 1kg tub \$45]

Contact www.liquid-chocolate.com

clog the auger and stop the motor, making unclogging very messy. Both fountains are also easy to disassemble for easy storage, but cleaning is far more onerous. After about 10 minutes of constantly running water and using detergent, our tester was still unable to perfectly clean either machine. The fountain is greasy after use, and chocolate gets trapped in all the nooks and crannies. Extra care should be taken as water can run into the workings when cleaning the base, and it's a good idea to use a disposable tablecloth if you want to avoid cleaning the table as well.

Despite these downsides, chocolate fountains are a unique way to entertain. One alternative to buying these machines is to rent one for your occasion – online sites and specialist chocolate shops provide do-it-yourself packages that include the chocolate, sweets and serving utensils. Some even cater for large events, such as weddings.

CHOICE VERDICT

Given the mess it creates, a chocolate fountain isn't something you'll be bringing out for every occasion. Buying the correct chocolate and all the fruit and sweets is also a costly affair. Hiring a machine for special occasions may be a more practical alternative. **REBECCA GATTO**



SUNBEAM CHOCOCY CHOCOLATE FOUNTAIN CF4100

Price \$74.95

Contact www.sunbeam.com.au

NUTSHELL

>> Based on our test results over the past year, we've outlined gift ideas at different price points.

>> We show the manufacturer's recommended retail price, but you can often do better by shopping around.

>> Be wary of gift cards that can be fraught with fees, risks and restrictions. Think carefully before buying one as a present.



Christmas is a 'testing' time

Our lab testers have compiled 27 great present ideas to suit your budget.

With Christmas present buying coming at the same time as interest rates are set to go up, finding value for money is really important. The good news is that, as CHOICE tests consistently show, finding the best quality presents doesn't have to mean paying the highest price.

Presents less than \$100

For coffee connoisseurs, some good quality ground coffee is an inexpensive gift. In our latest taste test (see Coffee Break, page 19) the **Illy Espresso Caff  Macinato** (picture 4) scores 83% for taste and comes in a presentable tin. It costs just under \$17 per 250g.

The festive season is a time for reconnecting with family and friends, and one way to encourage your loved ones to keep in touch in the New Year is by giving them a good phone. You can buy a quality cordless landline phone with an answering machine for less than \$100. The **Siemens Gigaset A265** (3, \$69) placed second in our test (see August 2009), has good range (handy when you're chatting and need to walk around the house), a warning when you're close to being out of range, an alarm and good standby time.

If you don't want one with an answering machine, the **Panasonic KX-TG1811ALS** (\$59.95) and **Siemens Gigaset A260** (\$59) are good-value, high-quality alternatives.

If someone you know might like a light and portable blender rather than a full-blown food processor, handheld blenders are the answer. We blended, emulsified, chopped, grinding and processed food to find the best handheld blenders on the market (March 2009), and for the budget conscious, the \$59.95 **Braun MultiQuick MR 400 Plus** (1) is on our What to Buy list. It's suitable for blending soft foods, is the second-top scorer overall (86%) and is great value when compared with the top scorer (\$209). Or, perhaps someone you know could use a handheld blender that also copes with harder tasks, such as chopping carrots and grinding the coarser ingredients that go into making a curry paste. In that case, look for the **Philips Hand Blender HR1363** (7, \$79.95, limited availability) and **Sunbeam StickMaster Plus SM6400** (6, \$70), our first and second-top scorers respectively.

A USB storage device can be a light and small stocking filler. They're handy for storing electronic



files, music and photos, and can fit on your key ring. You can pay up to \$178 for a USB flash drive, but we recommend the **Super Talent SM-RBK (2, \$59)**, our top overall scorer in *CHOICE Computer*, July/August 2009, and also the cheapest on test. Its stated storage capacity is 16GB, and it's very easy to use.

For the amateur photographer, one way to avoid blurred shots is a light and stable tripod. Our First Look review (September 2009) found that while most travel tripods aren't great, the **Velbon CX Mini (13, \$65 including a carry bag)** is the best of an average bunch. It's not really able to handle an SLR with a long lens, but will manage to keep anything smaller than a bridge camera reasonably still. It's easy to use, light and compact, but at only 645mm tall, you'll have to sit down to see through the viewfinder or put it on something solid to get to normal standing height.

Presents \$101 to \$200

The portable media player market is constantly advancing. Our February 2009 test list included a range of manufacturers – Apple, Archos, Cowon, Creative Zen, irriver, Microsoft and Sony – and most sell for between \$300 and \$550. The cheapest in our What to Buy list is the 8GB **Apple iPod nano (5, \$199)**, which is very light and thin, has a very good sound rating and a sharp video appearance. As with all iPods you'll need to use iTunes software to transfer music, which some people don't like. An updated **iPod nano with video**

(also 8GB and \$199) has been released in time for the Christmas rush. It includes a video recording feature and FM radio.

For someone who already has a portable media player, a speaker dock makes a great accessory. We tested 15 for sound quality, ease of use and standby power (June 2009). Of our recommended models, the **Altec Lansing inMotion iM310 (9, \$149)** has the second-highest performance score and the best standby energy score. It will work on batteries, is OK for outdoor use and has good on-board controls. On the downside, it has no remote control or display. The **GHT 2.1 Home Entertainment System (also \$149)** has the highest performance score (80%) and is a very good choice for outdoor use. It has good on-board controls, but also has no display, is relatively heavy and bulky and won't work with batteries. Nevertheless, these sound docks achieved the best ratings on test, with overall scores of 72% and 70% respectively.

If you're looking for a relatively cheap camera (September 2009), consider the **Canon PowerShot A480 (8)**, as it has more good points than bad and is only \$199. It's small and light, has 10 megapixels (that means the resolution is good when you print big photos), its monitor distortions are low and it has good macro performance. Its downsides are its manual exposure settings and single manual focus setting, which is difficult to use. >

Our testing consistently shows that you don't always have to pay top price to find the best quality products.



BEST
BUY

< For avid walkers and trekkers, a handheld GPS (June 2009) can confirm your position if you're lost, and help you find your way back to safety. And if you know the coordinates of a destination – anywhere in the world – it will show you how to get there on foot. Most are very expensive – the top-scoring Garmin Oregon 400c is \$750 – but a cheaper alternative is the **Garmin eTrex H** (10, \$149, 68% overall). If you're after a bargain, it's worth considering as a backup to your compass and map. It's the lightest unit on test, passed the water immersion test and has the smallest measured location error (2.8m). On the downside, its screen is monochrome and has low resolution, and there's no supplied cable. PC or Mac connectivity is an optional extra, but for its price it's a solid basic performer.

For full backup and storage of your computer files, a flash USB key probably isn't big enough but a portable hard drive may be (*CHOICE Computer*, May/June 2009). Of the seven in our What to Buy list, the **Verbatim Portable Hard Drive** (11, \$139) achieved the top overall test score. Physically, it's a bit bigger than some of the other models but is also the lightest 2.5-inch hard drive tested. It includes backup software and, according to our technology experts, has "good clearance" – no other USB ports are obstructed.

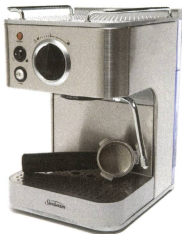
Verbatim also appears as a Best Buy in a completely different category – wireless headphones (April 2009). While in many cases the sound quality from wireless headphones generally isn't as good as that of wired

headphones, and many create a hissing sound, they can be handy for people who need to crank up the TV or stereo volume to compensate for hearing shortcomings. **Verbatim 41925** (no picture, \$109.95) scored top marks in our test – even better than a set costing \$450. It rates well for comfort and perceived weight, has excellent standby energy use and can be charged via USB or AC adapter. Unfortunately, however, they are hard to clean and using the headphones cuts off sound from the TV for a person not wearing the headphones. The measured maximum range is only four meters and the claimed battery life, at four hours, is also low.

A top-scoring small espresso machine can set you back \$250 or more, but we recommend the **Sunbeam Café Espresso Stainless EM3800** (14, \$179) (*CHOICE*, March 2008, still available). It achieved good scores for making coffee, ease of use, milk frothing and the ease with which you can keep its exterior clean. There were no bad points. Another option is the cheapest model we tested, the **Breville Barista BES200** (\$169.95), which wasn't far off the pace. It has a good ease of use score, indicates when the drip tray is full and is easy to keep the exterior clean. However, it doesn't score as well as some others in the coffee taste test, achieves only an OK milk-frothing score and has relatively difficult controls.

If you're after a juicer, the **Breville BJE200 Juice Fountain** (12, \$169.95) and **Sunbeam JE6400S Fresh Start** (15, \$179) are the cheapest models in our recommended list (July 2009) with overall scores of 82% and 81% respectively.

14

BEST
BUY

15



16



17



REPORT CHRISTMAS PRESENTS ■■■

Be wary of gift cards and vouchers, which have been the subject of numerous complaints to CHOICE over the years.

Presents \$201 to \$500

A car GPS is like an electronic street directory that not only shows you how to get from one point to another, but also connects to a series of satellites to calculate your position. The most expensive models cost more than \$800, but four under \$300 make it onto our What to Buy list (May 2009 and updates), including the second-placed **Tom Tom XL 340** (17). Among its

good features are the number of "points of interest", excellent route display, screen visibility in daylight and voice quality. And when day becomes night, the screen automatically changes to night mode. The XL 340 can also tell you the name of the street to turn into and advise when to change lanes before making a turn.

Since May 2009, digital radio broadcasts have been transmitted in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth >

BE WARY OF GIFT CARDS

If you're stuck for a gift idea or time simply runs out, a gift card is an easy solution. However, over the years, these cards and vouchers have been the subject of numerous complaints to CHOICE. The retailers are on to a winner here – they get the cash straight away, but know a substantial percentage won't be redeemed. Members told us about some issues they encountered.

- Retailers set a time limit on the validity of cards, such as six months to two years.
- Gift cards often will not be honoured for transactions less than a specified amount.

- Risks for the consumer – if a card is lost or stolen, it can be used by someone else (just like cash).
- Restrictions about which shops will accept the card, particularly shopping centre cards.
- In some cases, retailers won't provide change.
- Vouchers not honoured after a business changes hands and no record of the sale remains – or so the retailer claims.
- Cards or vouchers not honoured by companies that go out of business, and no refund provided.
- Fees, including for card activation, replacement and phone support.

The last word on gift vouchers goes to CHOICE member Graham Brown. "The only gift voucher I will accept is one issued by the Australian government," Graham says. "These gift vouchers have so many benefits – no fees, no restrictions on where or when you can use them, and you can even use part of them and get change. The vouchers come in many useful denominations and combinations: \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100. The best feature is that they can be used anywhere in any way. Now when I am given an Australian government gift voucher, it goes with my own collection of vouchers in my wallet and can be quite useful at any time I choose."

The Wii Fit is a fun way to help almost anyone – from kids to parents and the elderly – get into shape.



18



19



20

21



< and Adelaide. This DAB+ technology is still emerging in Australia, and the radios themselves are expensive. One manufacturer, Pure, achieved the top four scores for various models in our test (July 2009). In third place was the **Pure One Elite** (16, \$249), with an overall score of 58%. It allows you to pause and rewind live radio, and its stereo speakers have reasonable vocals, midrange and high frequencies, if a little muddy or tinny at times. With new types of DAB+ radios coming onto the market, the prices are likely to come down; our experts suggest you listen before you buy.

Digital photo frames can display your photos in a still or slideshow manner. Some play music and even movies, just like a miniature computer monitor, and they can be hung on the wall or supported by an adjustable stand. Photos can usually be displayed directly from a USB key or transferred to internal memory from your PC, although they need to be plugged into a power supply, rather than operating on batteries. At \$319, the **Agfaphoto AF 6105MS** (18) is the cheapest in our What to Buy list (October 2009, limited availability from Dick Smith). It doesn't have a regular USB port, but does have a USB adapter and mini-USB for computer connection.

For the kids

As well as some of the items already covered, games consoles are a perennial favourite for kids (and some adults too). CHOICE enlisted the most expert tester available – a 10-year-old schoolboy – to evaluate the **Nintendo DSi** (20, \$299.95, August 2009), a handheld

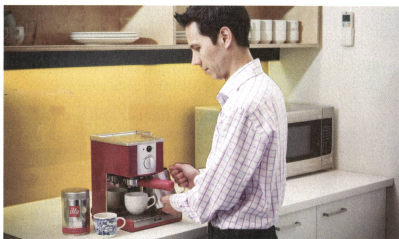
console that's one of the most popular gaming devices on the planet. It scored four stars. As our experts say: "If you want your kids to have the latest and greatest console to make their friends jealous, the Nintendo DSi should do the trick. However, if your kids already have a DS, particularly with a large collection of Game Boy Advance games, the DSi's additions may not be enough to justify the investment."

The **Nintendo Wii** (21, \$399.95) is another option. Playing Wii games isn't just about twiddling your thumb on a joystick; you can play games by waving your arms about or making a quick flick of the wrist to play tennis and golf. And for \$150 you can add the **Wii Fit**, which offers dozens of exercise activities designed to help almost anyone – from kids and parents to the elderly – get into shape. It's no substitute for proper fitness equipment or a trained instructor, but Wii can be a fun and healthy experience.

The **Sony PSP Slim & Lite 3002** (19, \$299) is a handheld MP3/MP4 player that plays games, and scored 78% in our test (August 2009). Its capacity (memory) is 0.9GB/1.8GB – much smaller than an iPod – with read-only ability for video, games and music. Its good points include a large screen, very good video rating, a memory stick duo slot, replaceable battery, full support for Windows Media Player and Wi-Fi connectivity (802.11 b model only).

If instead of video games, you'd prefer something that encourages children to get out and enjoy the great outdoors, a bicycle is a great gift. We found passable models on the market for under \$100 – turn to page 60 for more.

You can find more information and detailed results at www.choice.com.au. ■



NUTSHELL

>> Fourteen brands of ground coffee on test.
>> Our top-rating brands include fair-trade and organic coffees, as well as one relatively cheap supermarket generic brand.

Australia is in the grip of the coffee cult. Sales of coffee now surpass tea more than threefold; even the most humble suburban café offers at least half a dozen styles of coffee, while tea drinkers are fobbed off with a tea bag and pot of lukewarm water. With so many brands and types of coffee on the supermarket shelves, and such a vast range of prices, how do you choose?

CHOICE asked three experts to rate 14 popular brands of ground coffee to find out which offered the best value for money. And by looking at where the various coffees were roasted and what packaging was used to preserve freshness, we also uncovered some pointers for picking a winner.

Expert opinion

We confined our test to ready-ground coffee, because most people opt for this convenience instead of buying coffee beans to grind themselves. And we only tested ground coffee marked as suitable for espresso machines, as this method of brewing coffee brings out its full flavour. Nonetheless, we found more than 30 brands in the major supermarkets – too many to test them all – so we narrowed it down to 14 popular coffees, all made from arabica beans, and one extra to see if price determines quality (see World's Most Expensive Coffee, page 21).

Illy Espresso Caffè Macinato, which comes in a distinctive silver tin at a hefty \$69 per kilo, was by far the most expensive supermarket coffee, but also the experts' clear favourite. Fortunately, however, you don't have to pay the earth for good coffee. Scarborough Fair and República brands are moderately priced, as well as being fair trade and organic, and both rated very well. The bargain buy, however, proved to be a supermarket generic brand, Woolworths Select Espresso Ground Coffee – see What to Buy, page 20, for the experts' comments on these top-rating coffees.

Surprisingly, the coffees made by top-selling brands Lavazza and Vittoria failed to impress. Lavazza Qualita Oro was dismissed by our expert tasters as "horrible", while Vittoria Oro was "far too bitter, not a nice coffee >

STORY DAVID OAKENFULL

Coffee break

Forget the top-selling ground coffees; CHOICE's expert taste-testers find better quality at affordable prices.

DID YOU KNOW?

Bean counters

Coffee berries (known as cherries), which contain the coffee bean, are the fruit of several species of small evergreen shrub. They're grown commercially in Australia, but the world's biggest producers of coffee are Brazil, Vietnam, Colombia and Indonesia. The fruit is usually picked by hand and the beans separated from the flesh of the fruit after drying or by a wet fermentation process, followed by washing with fresh water. The dried beans are sold as "green coffee" (coffee beans before they're roasted).

Arabica coffee comes from the species *Coffea arabica*. This is the best coffee for flavour, but the plants are delicate and require careful cultivation. All coffees on test are made from arabica beans.

Robusta coffee, from *Coffea canephora*, lacks the great flavour of arabica coffees but is cheaper because the plants are less susceptible to disease and produce higher yields. Some brands of ground coffee (not included in our test) include robusta blended with arabica beans, but robusta is used more by manufacturers of instant coffee.

Espresso coffee has a more concentrated flavour than coffee brewed by other methods. Espresso machines force hot (but not boiling) water through ground coffee under pressure. This produces a shot of dense black coffee covered by crema, a foam of finely dispersed oil droplets (rich in aroma compounds) and tiny bubbles of gas (mostly residual carbon dioxide from the coffee ground).

A pale crema suggests the grind is too coarse, thus allowing the water to flow through the coffee too quickly to pick up its full flavour; a very dark crema suggests the grind is too fine, or that too much coffee has been loaded into the machine.



Rainforest Alliance or Fairtrade certification ensure your coffee is grown using sustainable agriculture and the farmers receive a fair financial return for their work.

HOW WE TEST

Our tester brews each coffee in the same way using a Breville ESP8B Café Roma espresso machine. Three experts rate the coffees, giving them scores for the colour and thickness of the crema (the tan-coloured foam on top of an espresso), aroma, flavour, mouthfeel (creaminess or wateriness) and aftertaste. The coffees are presented in random order identified only by numbers, so the experts don't know which brands of coffee they're tasting.



David (right) and Matthew Gee are from Barista Basics Coffee Academy in Sydney.



Fiona Mair is CHOICE's home economist; she has extensive experience in judging coffee.

< to drink at all". Kopi Luwak also failed to impress. This unusual coffee was tested blind alongside the other cheaper coffees, but only rated a middle-of-the-range score.

What determines flavour and aroma?

Aficionados say espresso is the ultimate coffee experience, as this brewing method brings out the full richness and complexity of its flavour and aroma. Freshly roasted and ground beans definitely make the best coffee, whatever method you use. More than 800 different chemical compounds contribute to the alluring aroma of good coffee, and there are likely many more yet to be identified. The flavour and aroma of coffee depend ultimately on the genetics of the plant, where and how it's grown, and how the beans are harvested and processed (see Bean Counters, page 19). But most of the compounds responsible for the aroma are developed during the roasting process.

Unfortunately, roasted coffee is highly perishable; the aroma molecules can evaporate, and be quickly degraded by oxidation. Worse, the aroma of ground coffee deteriorates even faster than that of roasted whole beans. Another problem is that roasted coffee continues to release carbon dioxide gas after roasting, so if it's packed too soon the bags can burst.

Coffee manufacturers have adopted different technological fixes for retaining freshness with differing

WHAT TO BUY



83% Illy Espresso
Caffé Machinato
Price \$6.80/100g
Expert comments
"That went down really well."
"Great flavour."



69% Grinders Brazil Style
Espresso Blend
Price \$3.60/100g
Expert comments
"Pleasant coffee; not bitter."



64% República Organic
Signature Blend
Price \$5/100g
Expert comments
"Not the best espresso one will ever have, but above average."



67% Scarborough Fair
Dark Roast
Price \$3.50/100g
Expert comments
"Earthy flavour."
"Not a strong-flavoured coffee."



63% Woolworths Select
Espresso Ground Coffee
Price \$2.40/100g
Expert comments
"Pretty good."



66% Gloria Jean's
Espresso Bin 18
Price \$4/100g
Expert comments
"Mild flavour; slightly bitter aftertaste."



See First Look, page 12, for our review of the latest in coffee-making wizardry: domestic coffee roasters.

degrees of success, as reflected by our scores. Top-scoring Illy Espresso Caffè Macinato is sealed in a can under pressure of nitrogen to prevent oxidation. In reality, the coffee is far from fresh as it's roasted and ground in Italy, but this clever technology is clearly a successful strategy for retaining a "fresh" aroma and flavour.

The other brands that scored well are packed in airtight bags fitted with a one-way valve that releases carbon dioxide while preventing oxygen or moisture getting into the bag and spoiling the aroma of the coffee. These brands are also likely to be fresher as they are roasted and ground in Australia or New Zealand. (República told CHOICE they roast their beans in Sydney so it can reach the shops within about two weeks of roasting.)

Most of the brands that fared poorly use older technology, in which the coffee is vacuum-sealed as a "brick". This can't be done before the roasted coffee has released its carbon dioxide, so some aroma is lost even before the coffee is packaged.

Storing coffee

Once you've opened a packet of coffee it's best stored in airtight tins or jars to minimise loss of aroma and damage from exposure to oxygen and moisture. Most experts suggest keeping it in a cool, dark place, such as a pantry. If you have more than about a week's supply, divide it into one-week quotas and store the rest in the freezer. Take one out when you need it, but don't open it until it's warmed up to prevent moisture condensing on the coffee. And it's never a good idea to store coffee in the ordinary fridge because moisture gets in every time you open the jar to use some.

Coffee concerns

Coffee is a labour-intensive crop grown mostly by small farmers but marketed by big corporations via middlemen (sometimes referred to as "coffee coyotes") who cream off much of the profit. Farmers often get little return for their labour, and the problem has been compounded by big fluctuations in the international price of coffee. Fairtrade certification protects small farmers from large price fluctuations and guarantees them a reasonable return.

Agricultural practices introduced in the 1970s have boosted production, but at the expense of the environment. Coffee was originally grown under the shade of trees that provided a habitat for many animals and insects, but many farmers have switched to "sun cultivation", in which coffee is grown under full sun with little or no forest canopy. This method gives higher yields but causes environmental degradation and requires greater use of fertilisers and pesticides.

Picking a coffee that is certified organic, as well as either Fairtrade or Rainforest Alliance certified, means the environment and workers are treated well. ■

GROUND COFFEE

Brand / coffee (in order of taste score)	Taste score (%)	Certification	Price per 100g (\$)
Illy Espresso Caffè Macinato	83		6.80
Grinders Brazil Style Espresso Blend	69		3.60
Gloria Jean's Espresso Bin 18	67	RA	4.00
Scarborough Fair Dark Roast Fairtrade Organic Arabica Coffee	67	FT, ORG	3.50
República Organic Signature Blend	64	FT, ORG	5.00
Woolworths Select Espresso Ground Coffee	63		2.40
Mandailing Estate Wild Lopi Luwak	59		100
You'll Love Coles Medium Roast	59		2.40
Just Organic Fairtrade Organic Ground Coffee (ALDI)	54	FT, ORG	2.00
IGA Signature	50		2.10
Robert Timms Italian Espresso Style	47		3.60
Amaroy Medium Roast (ALDI)	41		1.70
Harris Espresso	41		2.20
Lavazza Qualita Oro (medium)	40		4.10
Vittoria Oro	38		4.00

USING THE TABLE Certification: **FT** Certified by Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International to comply with standards published on its website, www.fairtrade.net. **ORG** Certified organic. **RA** Certified by Rainforest Alliance to comply with standards published on its website, www.rainforest-alliance.org. **Price** Based on prices we paid in Sydney in July 2009, rounded to the nearest ten cents.

CASE STUDY

World's most expensive coffee

Kopi Luwak is an Indonesian coffee renowned as much for its price tag as its rather bizarre origins. It retails for a heady \$1000/kg and is made from coffee berries eaten by the Asian Palm Civet (pictured), a cat-sized mammal. The civet digests the flesh of the fruit but the coffee beans inside the berries pass through its gut undigested. They're collected from the animal's droppings, washed and lightly roasted. It's suggested the coffee tastes extra good because the civets are fussy eaters and only choose the most perfect berries. Research at



the University of Guelph in Canada found the animal's digestive juices penetrate the beans and break down proteins that give rise to some of the coffee's bitter flavours.

We included Mandailing Estate Wild Kopi Luwak in our test for the novelty factor, but our experts, tasting blind, didn't pick it as anything special (see the table, above). It may be the world's most expensive coffee, but it's clearly not always the best-tasting.



NUTSHELL

- >> Consumers in the eastern states benefit

from the presence of Aldi, with Coles and Woolworths offering more competitive grocery prices in these areas.

>> Supermarket specials can make your weekly shop cheaper, but smaller suppliers are often paying the price.

>> Fresh food prices vary significantly, so shop around – and not just in supermarkets – to get the best deal.

Of the 12%-14% of after-tax income the average Australian household spends on groceries each year, most goes into the coffers of supermarkets. Coles and Woolworths dominate, accounting for 55%-60% of what we spend on groceries (compared with the UK, where the four largest retailers between them have just 65% of the market). Yet a controversial inquiry into grocery prices last year by the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) concluded Australia's supermarket industry is "workably competitive", and that supermarkets have little power to control grocery price increases.

To get our own snapshot of what consumers are paying across the country, CHOICE wrote a shopping list, grabbed our green bags and hit the supermarket aisles. Two years on from our last survey (CHOICE, July 2007), we found:

- Grocery prices have increased and Aldi is still cheapest.
- Where you live and the intensity of retail competition in your area has a major impact on what you pay at your local supermarket.
- There's almost no difference in the average price of our basket of groceries at Coles and Woolworths, even when specials are included.

Aldi has the cheapest groceries

Given its impressive track record in our previous price surveys and promise of “permanently low prices”, it’s no surprise that Aldi’s basket is once again significantly cheaper than its competitors. It cost us just \$94.30 – 25% less than a comparable basket from Coles and Woolworths (see Average Price of our Grocery Basket – Retailers Compared, top right).

While we haven't compared the quality of Aldi products with equivalent brands, Aldi is certainly hard to beat when it comes to low prices. So how do they do it? If you've shopped at Aldi, you'll know it's a no-frills experience. A spokesperson told us, "We can keep our prices low because we run a lean and efficient business, and concentrate on selling a select range of exclusive brand products. We don't spend money on expensive brand marketing campaigns, customer loyalty programs or merchandising and point-of-sale displays."

STORY RACHEL CLEMONS

Check out your groceries

Our national survey reveals the true price we pay at the supermarket.

Less than \$1 difference for duopoly

While the ACCC report highlights Aldi as a “vigorous price competitor”, it concedes Coles and Woolworths face limited price competition from the independent sector. There’s also little incentive for the majors to compete aggressively on price, which is reflected in our survey results. As in previous years, there was no runaway winner from the duopoly, with less than \$1 in difference between the basket price at Coles (\$127.67) and Woolworths (\$126.87). IGA and FoodWorks, the two independent supermarket chains surveyed, returned the most expensive baskets at \$142.68 and \$154.73 respectively.

Where you live makes a difference

Our results show that residents of Geelong, the NSW Central Coast and Forster pocket more change from their weekly shop, while those who live in Hobart and Bunbury pay a premium (see The Cost of Groceries – Cities Compared, top right). The results by state are along similar lines – NSW, Queensland, ACT and Victoria have the cheapest groceries, and Tasmania the most expensive (see The Cost of Groceries – States Compared, top right).

Geographical price differences can be explained by a range of factors, including increased delivery costs to regional stores, regional differences in the size and characteristics of demand and differences in local competition. According to the ACCC, higher prices in Tasmania, WA and NT are largely the result of two factors: a higher cost of goods (due to greater transport costs and reduced economies of scale) and "perhaps" a less competitive environment (in Tassie, the average distance from a major chain store to its nearest competing supermarket is more than double the national average – and Woolworths has a majority share of the wholesale supply market). And of course, none of these states has Aldi. To CHOICE, the need for more effective competition in these areas is obvious.

'Aldi effect' equals 5% less

It's not just Aldi shoppers who benefit from its low prices; the ACCC inquiry found consumers pay 0.8% less at Coles and 0.7% less at Woolworths if there's an Aldi store within 1km, compared with no Aldi within 5km. Our results suggest

AVERAGE PRICE OF OUR GROCERY BASKET – RETAILERS COMPARED

Supermarket (number of stores)	Basket price (excluding specials)	Basket price (including specials)
Aldi (23)	\$94.69	\$94.30
Coles (55)	\$136.52	\$127.67
FoodWorks (3)	\$162.60	\$154.73
IGA (all variants) (10)	\$147.73	\$142.68
Woolworths/Safeway (53)	\$136.49	\$126.87

Table notes The average prices for Coles, Woolworths/Safeway, IGA and Foodworks. Aldi is included for interest only, as its brands may not be directly comparable in quality with those brands we priced in other supermarkets.

THE COST OF GROCERIES – STATES COMPARED*

Rank 2009	Rank 2007	State/Territory (number of Coles/ Woolworths stores)	2009 mean basket price*
1	5	NSW (19/18)	\$125.32
2	1	QLD (8/8)	\$125.62
3	4	ACT (3/3)	\$125.73
4	3	VIC (11/11)	\$126.02
5	2	SA (4/4)	\$128.55
6	6	NT (1/1)	\$133.23
7	7	WA (5/6)	\$133.37
8	8	TAS (4/3)	\$135.00

* Coles and Woolworths/Safeway only.
Price includes specials.

THE COST OF GROCERIES – CITIES COMPARED*

Rank 2009	Rank 2007	Region (number of Coles/Woolworths stores)	2009 mean basket price*
1	9	Geelong (3/3)	\$123.15
2	12	Central Coast (2/2)	\$124.08
3	3	Forster (1/1)	\$124.09
4	11	Sydney (8/7)	\$124.73
5	1	Rockhampton (1/1)	\$124.74
6	14	Wollongong (2/2)	\$124.76
7	4	Brisbane (4/4)	\$124.90
8	13	Canberra (3/3)	\$125.73
9	6	Gold Coast (2/2)	\$125.95
10	2	Newcastle (4/4)	\$126.04
11	10	Melbourne (6/6)	\$126.57
12	5	Mt Gambier (1/1)	\$126.95
13	23	Dubbo (1/1)	\$128.01
14	21	Wodonga (1/1)	\$128.18
15	8	Townsville (1/1)	\$128.74
16	18	Wagga Wagga (1/1)	\$129.08
17	7	Adelaide (3/3)	\$129.09
18	15	Ballarat (1/1)	\$129.14
19	20	Albany (1/1)	\$131.67
20	19	Perth (3/4)	\$132.87
21	16	Darwin (1/1)	\$133.23
22	17	Launceston (2/1)	\$133.49
23	22	Hobart (2/2)	\$136.13
24	na	Bunbury (1/1)	\$136.79

* Coles and Woolworths/Safeway only. Price includes specials.

HOW WE SURVEY

Supermarkets and locations

We sent undercover shoppers into 145 supermarkets in 24 cities across Australia. The chains surveyed are Aldi, Coles, Foodworks, IGA and Woolworths/Safeway. We survey supermarkets in clusters so that each store has local competition.

The majority of supermarkets surveyed remained consistent with our 2007 study. **Grocery basket items** We collected price data on 35 different products. All Aldi and non-Aldi products are matched as closely as possible. Sixteen of the items in the CHOICE basket were kept the same as in our 2007

basket for comparison. Most items in the survey are familiar quality brands, but for bread, bacon, butter, milk and sour cream we price the cheapest products we can find, usually generic. **Fresh food staples** For the first time we included bananas, chicken breasts and tomatoes in this 2009 supermarket survey.

shoppers in the eastern states (where Aldi has a presence) pay less for groceries, with the top 10 cheapest cities in our survey all located on the east coast.

Coles and Woolworths price-match Aldi on products they consider to be directly comparable to Aldi's products – primarily their private label items. The ACCC inquiry found that on average Coles customers paid 5.1% less for these products if they shopped at a store within 1km of an Aldi, compared with Coles customers shopping at stores without an Aldi within 5km. Woolworths more recently extended its pricing strategy to apply to all its stores in the states where Aldi is present (except for the most remote stores), not just the stores located near an Aldi. There are more than 200 Aldi stores located in the ACT, NSW, Queensland and Victoria. When we asked about possible expansion to other states, Aldi told us that it's "focused on its growth along the eastern seaboard for now".

The "Aldi effect" is a positive one for consumers, but ultimately it's limited in that it doesn't benefit shoppers in all states and is only significant on prices of Coles or Woolworths brands comparable to Aldi's 1000-odd products – minuscule in comparison to the tens of thousands of products stocked by the major chains.

Truth behind 'specials'

While Coles and Woolworths tend not to compete aggressively on price, they do use specials, or "price promotions", to lure in shoppers. The major supermarket chains have between 2000 and 4000 products on special or promotion at any one time. Aisles heave with promotions – individual price specials, "3 for the price of 2" and other multi-buy promotions – and these can make a substantial saving to your weekly shop. Our survey found savings from the major chains in particular >

CHOICE ONLINE

The grocery industry has had a busy schedule since our last survey, with major changes impacting on the landscape. For more details, go to www.choice.com.au/supermarketprices.

JULY 08	MAY 09	JUNE 09	AUG 09	SEP 09	OCT 09	DEC 09
ACCC publishes its grocery prices inquiry report, with the verdict that grocery retailing in Australia is "workably competitive".	Woolworths acquires organic food retailer Macro Wholefoods. The eight stores are currently being rebranded as Thomas Dux, an up-market subsidiary that competes against gourmet grocers but isn't focused on organic food.	The government pulls the plug on GroceryCHOICE, depriving consumers of timely and accurate information on 35 million grocery prices and local supermarket comparisons.	Costco Wholesale, a giant US-based retailer, opens its first Australian store in Melbourne.	ACCC strikes a deal with Coles and Woolworths to phase out restrictive lease terms that have prevented shopping centre landlords from allowing competitors to open stores in the same centres.	A report into the ACT grocery sector finds little competition between Coles and Woolworths when it comes to large full-scale supermarkets, and recommends the ACT government prioritise land sales to competitors of the major supermarket chains.	Unit pricing becomes mandatory in large supermarkets, making it easier for consumers to compare the price and value of similar products in-store.

Big retailers force producers to bear the brunt of promotional exposure – and smaller players simply can't compete.

< were significant – about \$10 for our basket. But it's worth considering who's ultimately footing this bill.

Manufacturers and other producers need to have their products on supermarket shelves, and for packaged products in particular, this really means the shelves of Coles and Woolworths. Most pay dearly for the privilege. Major supermarket chains generally hold all the power when it comes to negotiating the terms on which goods are supplied and sold – the terms covering everything from the price retailers pay for products, to rebates and other discounts that the supplier must give the retailer for warehousing their products or getting paid within a certain timeframe. Suppliers also generally have to wear the cost of their product being on special.

Larger and multinational manufacturers such as Nestlé can afford these terms in order to maintain market dominance. But according to Kate Carnell, CE of the Australian Food and Grocery Council, the same can't be said for smaller producers. "To get their product promoted by big retailers means offering the product at an extraordinarily low price, often one that's not sustainable to the manufacturer's business." In other words, big retailers force producers to bear the full brunt of any promotional exposure, and smaller players just can't compete.

According to the ACCC, rebates provided to major chains (which suppliers must offer in order to secure shelf space) have increased slightly in the retailer's favour since 2002. So, major supermarkets pay less for stock at the expense of suppliers, but due to lack of transparency around trading terms it's impossible to determine if any savings are passed on to consumers.

The ACCC concluded there's little evidence to substantiate allegations of buyer power being exercised in an anti-competitive or unconscionable manner. However, it conceded that "there were some complaints of buyer power being

exercised where the complainant appeared to be genuinely reluctant to provide information to the ACCC out of concern about retribution if details were provided and investigated".

Fresh food included in survey

While 70% of packaged groceries are sold through Coles and Woolworths, the major chains only account for about half of all fresh food (such as fruit, vegetables and meat) sold in Australia. This allows for greater competition, as farmers have the option of selling to export markets or wholesale markets (which in turn supply to independent supermarkets, butchers and greengrocers). In theory, this diminishes the buyer power of Coles and Woolworths in this category.

This year, for the first time, we included fresh foods in our survey – bananas, chicken breasts and tomatoes – and found prices were markedly lower in areas with a greater population density, indicating the pressure of local competition. In NSW Woolworths stores alone, for example, chicken breasts ranged from \$7.99/kg in outer Sydney suburbs Blacktown, Liverpool and Hornsby, to \$12.98/kg in regional Wagga Wagga. Tomatoes ranged from \$1.78/kg in Tuggerah to \$3.98/kg in Dubbo, while bananas ranged from \$1.95/kg in Belmont to \$4.48/kg in Dubbo.

But the price you pay at the checkout doesn't always reflect farm gate prices, even after factoring in transport and other costs. Apple & Pear Australia says 2009 is a good year for apple production, and consequently apple growers are getting paid almost a third less for their produce – yet consumers are paying just 5%–10% less. In spite of these and similar assertions, the ACCC found little evidence to suggest retail price hikes for fresh products exceed increases in farm-gate prices. Frank Zumbo, Associate Professor within

DID YOU KNOW?

Australian food inflation is consistently high

Headline inflation may have fallen to an annual rate of 1.3%, but despite a drop in the last quarter (largely due to a decrease in fruit and vegetable prices) food inflation is still running high at 2.5% – twice the general inflation rate. Our survey found some packaged grocery prices have risen well above the rate of average food inflation; we paid 25.7% more for Sunrice Premium White Long Grain Rice (2kg), for example, than we did in our 2007 survey – more than four times the price increase for food generally over the same period. See Changes in Average Price of Individual Basket Items, below.

There are many explanations for price rises in groceries, including higher costs caused by drought, quarantine restrictions and global commodity price increases. According to supermarket chains, the increasing profit margins of multinational grocery manufacturers are a major contributor to high food price inflation, while suppliers argue the opposite is true. There's also speculation that major chains are raising grocery prices in order to fund their fuel and liquor discounts and the multitude of price promotions they use to lure customers into their stores (although the supermarkets reject

such claims). The ACCC inquiry found only a small percentage of grocery price increases could be attributed to increased profits made by the major grocery chains and wholesalers.

Whatever the cause, there's little doubt food prices in Australia have increased significantly in recent times. Australia has the tenth-highest food inflation of 30 OECD countries for the year to September. We may not be the worst off, but we're unique among many OECD countries for having a rate of food price inflation that's been consistently above our overall inflation over the last 10 years.

Once again, Aldi has the cheapest price for the CHOICE grocery basket of all the major supermarkets.

the School of Business Law and Taxation at the University of NSW, is cynical. "Coles and Woolies are paying farmers less and less, but retail price doesn't fall in proportion to fall in the price that farmers get. So the reality is that Coles' and Woolworths' profit margins have been growing."

Price promotions play a big part in moving fresh produce in the major chains, particularly when it's a bumper season for a certain crop. But they can also have an insidious knock-on effect. The ACCC report explains how when promotional specials for apples, for example, are run by the major chains in periods when there's no excess supply, shortages of similar quality apples in the wholesale markets can occur. This helps drive up wholesale prices, which means smaller supermarket chains and greengrocers (and their customers) may be forced to pay significantly higher prices – hardly a level playing field.

What you can do

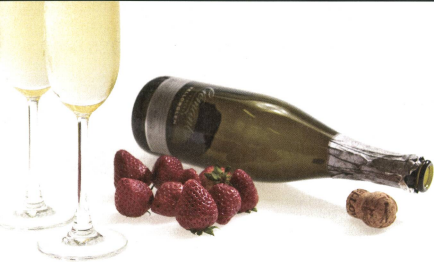
Join our fight for a fairer deal at the checkout.

- Write to your supermarket asking them to help you make smarter grocery choices by publishing more store-based prices on its website. Use our letter at www.choice.com.au/supermarkets
- Look critically at specials and multi-buy offers – are they really saving you money? Use unit pricing to get the best deal.
- Give your local greengrocers, bakers, butchers and delis a go. Tell us about your experience at www.choice.com.au/shoparound ■

CHANGES IN AVERAGE PRICE OF INDIVIDUAL BASKET ITEMS (NOT ON SPECIAL) FROM 2007-2009

Basket items	Change since 2007 (%)
2009 basket total	5.5
Sunrice Premium White Long Grain Rice (2kg)	25.7
Chum Canned Dog Food (1.2kg)	22.1
San Remo Large Pasta Spirals (500g)	19
Sakata BBQ Rice Crackers (100g)	18.1
SPC Baked Beans in Tomato Sauce (425g)	16.7
Lipton Quality Black Tea Bags (100 bags)	14.5
Ski D'Lite Yoghurt (2 x 200g)	14
Heinz Greenseas Tuna in Brine (425g)	10
Arnott's Tim Tam Originals (200g)	8.5
Cottlee's Strawberry Conserve (500g)	7.7
Just Juice Orange Juice (2L)	6.9
Goulburn Valley Sliced Peaches in Natural Juice (825g)	5.7
Moccona Freeze-Dried Coffee Granules - Classic (100g)	3.4
Libra Ultra Thins regular Pads with Wings (14pk)	1.9
Cheapest available middle rasher bacon (250g)	-10.8
Cheapest available sliced white bread (700g)	-11.3

Table notes We priced 35 items in total, 16 of which are shown here as we have 2007 prices for comparison. Aldi prices are not included as its brands may not be directly comparable with the brands we priced in other supermarkets. To see the full list of CHOICE basket items we priced, go to www.choice.com.au/supermarketprices



STORY DAVID OAKENFULL

Cheer leaders

CHOICE's wine experts recommend some top-scoring budget bubbly for your celebration.

more lenient in rating cheaper wines, so the scores are not strictly comparable between price brackets, but any differences aren't huge. Yellowglen Crémant 2007 (\$16) is the only wine from this higher price bracket that made it into the CHOICE Mixed Dozen (below).

A touch of class

The next price bracket offers some real gems at good prices. The top-scoring wines in the \$20 to \$50 range are made by the traditional method, where the final fermentation takes place in the bottle it's sold in, rather than in a tank.

Brown Brothers Pinot Noir Chardonnay Pinot Meunier is one of the cheaper wines in this bracket – but for snob appeal, French champagne Pol Gessner Brut Reserve is good value at \$43. Both are in the silver medal class.

The real McCoy

Perhaps as expected, our four top wines (with scores equivalent to gold medals at a wine show) are French champagnes costing upwards of \$50 a bottle. But

NUTSHELL

>> Many of the cheaper sparkling wines on test scored well, and some low-alcohol ones are worth considering.

>> Sparkling wines in the \$12-\$20 bracket are disappointing overall.

A good bottle of bubbly adds a certain *je ne sais quoi* to any celebration. But you can pay anything from a mere \$5 for an Australian sparkling wine to as much as \$500 or more for a bottle of imported French champagne. Where should you draw the line?

CHOICE's experts taste-tested 72 popular sparkling wines and champagnes, ranging in price from \$7 to \$205 a bottle, and were pleasantly surprised by some of the cheap ones, such as Renman River Breeze Sparkling Cuvée (\$7) – but disappointed by some of the more expensive, such as Bollinger Brut la Grande Année 1999 (\$205).

Cheap and cheerful

Fifteen sparkling whites on test cost \$12 or less, and our experts consider them all good value for money (see the table, right). The major decision is whether you want sweet or dry, so check the tasting notes to see which appeal.

As our experts found, spending between \$12 and \$20 doesn't guarantee a superior sparkling wine. They were

CHOICE MIXED DOZEN



LOW ALCOHOL

Yellowglen Jewel Pink

\$12.00

LESS THAN \$12

Renmano River Breeze

Sparkling Cuvée

\$7.00

Minchinbury White Seal

\$7.50

Hardys Regional Range

Classic Cuvée

\$8.50

\$12 TO \$20

Yellowglen Crémant 2007

\$16.00

\$20 TO \$50

Brown Brothers Pinot Noir

Chardonnay Pinot Meunier

\$26.00

Pol Gessner Brut Reserve

\$43.00

MORE THAN \$50

Piper-Heidsieck Brut

\$60.00

SPARKLING ROSÉ

Carrington Blush Special Cuvée

\$8.50

Hardys Regional Reserve Pink

\$8.50

SPARKLING RED

Yellowglen Red

BEST BUY \$12.00

Seaview Sparkling Shiraz

\$9.50

"champagne" on the label doesn't necessarily guarantee a great bubbly. At \$205, Bollinger Brut la Grande Année is particularly disappointing, with the experts picking up slightly burnt or oxidised flavours. The only Aussie wine in this bracket, Arras Pinot Noir 2002 (\$68), rated the same score as the much more expensive Bollinger.

Light but likable

Low-alcohol sparkling wines are becoming popular, with claims such as "lighter in alcohol and calories" and "offers all the enjoyment of your favourite bubbles with 30% less calories". In fact, alcohol accounts for more than 90% of the kilojoules in wine. We tested six sparkling wines with alcohol levels from 6% to 8% (12% is usual for full-strength). While none achieved an outstanding score, the experts were pleasantly surprised. Yellowglen Jewel Pink may appeal if you like a sweeter wine.

Pinks and reds

A sparkling rosé should be light and fruity, but the experts found none of our selection of best-sellers to be outstanding. Among the sparkling reds (a style developed in Australia), Yellowglen Red scored in the silver medal class, while Seaview Sparkling Shiraz is very good value at \$9.50 a bottle. Sparkling reds are very different, rich and full-bodied – excellent with a traditional Christmas roast turkey. >

HOW WE TEST

Expert tasters (see Meet the Experts, below) are trained to judge wines on their merits, setting aside personal preferences. They know the price range, but otherwise the wines are tasted blind, identified only by numbers. Each expert independently gives the wines a score out of 20, following the international show-scoring system for wines – a maximum of three for appearance, seven for nose (aroma) and 10 for palate. The score published

in the table is a consensus score reached when the experts discuss the wine after tasting, still without knowing the wines. A score of 14–15 points indicates the wine is OK but nothing special. One that scores 15.5–16.9 points would be awarded a bronze medal at a wine show, 17–18.4 points would earn a silver and 18.5 or more a gold. Occasionally, the experts couldn't agree. In these cases we refer to the wine as a "mixed emotion" in the table.



MEET THE EXPERTS

Our thanks to the team of six expert wine tasters.



Garry Ford is with the Hardy Wine Company in South Australia. He's a specialist in sparkling wines with 25 years' wine-making experience.



Phillip Gregory works for specialist importer Pinot NOW. He is an experienced wine judge with a Master of Wine Quality from the University of Western Sydney.



Jim Bertouch is a rheumatologist and an experienced wine judge with a Master of Wine Quality from the University of Western Sydney.



Paul Rogers is a wine lawyer who holds the Australasian Wine Masters Award from the International Wine Academy.



Clara Davidson is manager of Bistrotte restaurant, Sydney. She received the inaugural Fine Wine Partners Student Sommelier of the Year Award in June 2009.



Ross McCann works for the specialist wine importer Vintage and Vine. He has years of tasting experience and has been the Rothbury Estate Taster of the Year.

WINE (IN RANK ORDER WITHIN PRICE BRACKETS)	SCORE OUT OF 20	ALCOHOL (%)	ORIGIN	PRICE (\$)	TASTING NOTES
LOW ALCOHOL					
Yellowglen Jewel Pink	16	6.0	Australia	12.00	Salmon pink with a fine bead; perfumed, savoury red fruits; lovely balance, not too dry or too sweet – good colour, good fruit.
Cockatoo Ridge Low Calorie Brut Cuvée	15	7.0	Australia	13.00	Pale green; faint citrus nose; crisp and drier style – light, dry with fresh acidity.
Yellowglen Bella 2009	15	7.5	Australia	16.00	Bright pink; muscat-like nose; sweet lolly water palate – liquid fairy floss.
Yellowglen Jewel Yellow	15	6.0	Australia	12.00	Straw gold with a fine bead; simple fruit nose; dryish style with a pleasant balance – simple, but fresh and dry.
Brown Brothers Zibibbo Rosa	14.5	8.0	Australia	17.00	Bright salmon pink; candied strawberries and raspberries; sweet and fruity – liquid fairy floss.
Mixed emotions					
Lindemans Early Harvest Sparkling	17-13	7.5	Australia	15.00	Pale yellow / lacks bubbles and mousse; pungent but not unpleasant / just a touch dull; complex and good length in mouth / dank, musty characters dominate – well balanced and attractive texture / a touch dry and empty.
UP TO \$12					
Hardys Regional Reserve Classic Cuvée	15.5	11.5	Australia	8.50	Very pale; pear, apple-sweet muscato nose; sweet but well balanced – a pretty wine, interesting floral character.
Minchinbury White Seal	15.5	11.5	Australia	7.50	Straw colour with vibrant bead; sweet tinge on nose; hint of muscat flavour over lemon – fresh and zesty, good value.
Omni Blue	15.5	10.0	Australia	12.00	Very pale straw; fruity nose, rose petals; good length and flavour – sweeter style, complex fruit and musk flavours.
Renmano River Breeze Sparkling Cuvée	15.5	11.5	Australia	7.00	Greenish yellow; bit of maturity, some lemon and toast; good mouthfeel and texture, good length – a touch clumsy on flavour.
Seaview Grande Cuvée	15.5	ns	Australia	9.50	Pale lemon-green; youthful lemon nose; soft texture, very clean on finish – a hint of richness.
Sepelt Fleur de Lys Chardonnay Pinot Noir	15.5	11.0	Australia	9.50	Pale yellow; simple lemon nose; soft aftertaste, well balanced – perfectly good drink, but plain.
Wolf Blass Eaglehawk Cuvée Brut	15.5	12.0	Australia	10.00	Pale straw colour; citrus nose; balanced fruit/acid/sweetness – good commercial style.
Banrock Station The Reserve Pinot Noir Chardonnay	15	12.0	Australia	11.50	Pale green tinge, lacks effervescence; more mature, maybe slightly tired; lemon and faint strawberry flavour – drinkable but plain.
Carrington Brut Reserve	15	11.5	Australia	7.00	Pale yellow; a bit bland, slightly rubbery; nice mouthfeel and good aftertaste – a touch plain but good depth of flavour.
Carrington Vintage Brut 2008	15	11.0	Australia	7.50	Light yellow, few bubbles; closed nose, slight hint of chalkiness; crisp, lemon citrus flavour – dry and crisp aperitif style.
Seaview Brut	15	ns	Australia	9.50	Good bubbles and mousse; soft fruit flavours; short and simple – tastes cheap.
Yellowglen Yellow	15	11.0	Australia	12.00	Good mousse, bright; youthful, slightly aromatic; simple primary fruit characters – perfectly drinkable, but not the volume of flavour you would like.
Queen Adelaide Brut	14.5	11.5	Australia	7.50	Pale lemon-green; musty nose; slightly sweet lolly-like fruit – punter friendly.
Sepelt Great Western Imperial Reserve	14.5	11.5	Australia	6.00	Straw yellow, rapid bead; touch of dirty socks; high residual sugar but balanced – drinkable but plain.
Mixed emotions					
Omni Classic NV	17-13.5	11.5	Australia	12.00	Lemon gold / lacks effervescence; subdued fruit nose / dull; balanced lively citrus palate / hard, slight industrial character – rich and starting to get some layers of flavour / very simple.
BETWEEN \$12 AND \$20					
Yellowglen Crémant 2007	16	12.0	Australia	16.00	Straw colour; cooler climate complexity, strawberry, lemon; powerful, although slightly simple – exhibits all the characters of a really good wine.
Hardys Sir James Pinot Noir Chardonnay Cuvée Brut	15.5	12.0	Australia	16.00	Very pale lemon; lean, lemony and chalky on nose; nice fruit mouth flavours – nothing special, but OK.
Jacobs Creek Chardonnay Pinot Noir	15.5	11.5	Australia	13.00	Pale gold; simple nose, apple, toast; light and dry, finishes well – simple but good.
Killawarra Klassic Brut	15.5	11.5	Australia	12.50	Straw-green tints; citrus and floral notes; lemon washing powder, hint of age – plain but some age that helps deliver flavour.

TASTE TEST SPARKLING WINES

WINE (IN RANK ORDER WITHIN PRICE BRACKETS)	SCORE OUT OF 20	ALCOHOL (%)	ORIGIN	PRICE (\$)	TASTING NOTES
Wolf Blass Red Label Chardonnay Pinot Noir	15.5	11.0	Australia	12.50	Medium straw colour; fresh lemony nose; hollow middle palate but good persistence – simple but attractive.
Yellowglen Pinot Noir Chardonnay 2007	15.5	12.0	Australia	16.00	Sandy gold colour; biscuity character to nose, peach and toast; good depth of flavour, medium length – OK to drink but a bit weak.
Grandin Brut NV	15	11.5	France	19.00	Bright green gold; struck match, sulphury nose; grapey character on palate with a hint of fruit – plain.
Jacobs Creek Reserve Chardonnay Pinot Noir 2006	15	12.0	Australia	19.00	Green gold colour; dull nose; marzipan dominates fruit flavour – nothing flash but some flavour richness.
Orlando Trilogy Cuvée Brut Pinot Noir Chardonnay Pinot Meunier	15	12.5	Australia	15.00	Pale straw; a little touch of sweetness; simple, crisp, slightly lemon – lacks length and persistence.
Mixed emotions					
Henkell Trocken Fine Sekt	16-14	11.5	Germany	18.00	Pale yellow; intriguingly complex / struck match, sulphur; rich, some sweetness with apricot and stone fruit / bitter industrial finish – fresh, interesting mix of flavours / not a winemaker's wine.
BETWEEN \$20 AND \$50					
Brown Brothers Pinot Noir Chardonnay Pinot Meunier	17.5	12.5	Australia	26.00	Pale lemon-gold; yeasty, toasty nose with a lovely touch of complexity; savoury nutty character, elegant – old-world characters, very good wine.
Pol Gessner Brut Reserve	17.5	12.5	France	43.00	Pale yellow; yeasty complex nose; dry fine texture, good acidity comes through – lovely, flavoursome, complex yet youthful.
Chandon Brut NV	16.5	12.5	Australia	28.00	Pale straw; citrus nose, lacking complexity; fruity palate, but a bit short and shallow – flavoursome but clumsy.
Clover Hill Pipers River 2004	16.5	13.0	Australia	50.00	Yellow gold; fresh almond, peaches and cream; rich and toasty, sweetness in back of palate – a good wine with a lovely touch of complexity.
Yarra Burn Pinot Noir Chardonnay Pinot Meunier 2006	16.5	ns	Australia	29.00	Pale straw; soft fruit nose, dull; length and texture, lemon zest but tired – finesse spoiled by the bitter finish.
Yellowglen Perle 2005	16.5	12.0	Australia	30.00	Pale gold with green flecks; rich and appealing nose; good flavour concentration and creamy texture – an attractive, approachable style.
Chandon Vintage Brut 2005	16	12.5	Australia	43.00	Pale lemon with a soft bead; strong citrus and lime nose; rich and dry with complexity on palate – a good food wine.
Deutz Marlborough Cuvée Brut	16	12.0	NZ	25.00	Pale straw; citrus nose, well balanced; slightly lacking in fruit and complexity – nice and fresh but a little boring.
Taltarni Brut Tache 2008	16	13.0	Australia	26.00	Salmon pink colour; strawberries and cream; sound, simple, good length – not over-sweet, refreshing.
Croser Piccadilly Valley Pinot Noir Chardonnay 2006	15.5	13.0	Australia	40.00	Pale yellow colour; tight and closed nose; light citrus fruit but a little astringent – uninspiring.
Jansz Premium Non Vintage Cuvée	15.5	12.5	Australia	30.00	Pale straw, green tints; dull nose, bland; good fruit concentration and length but lacks finesse – not bad but could be much better.
Ninth Island Chardonnay Pinot Noir Pinot Meunier	15.5	12.5	Australia	30.00	Pale lemon; soft fruit showing; a hint of sweet melons and limes – not bad but a harsh finish.
Hanging Rock Macedon Brut Cuvée	15	12.0	Australia	45.00	Green tinge; peaches, apricots and a touch of sweetness; lots of flavour but dry and bitter – bitter and cloying.
Mixed emotions					
Grant Burge Pinot Noir Chardonnay	19-15	12.5	Australia	26.00	Sandy gold; intriguing, exotic, rich alluring / lemon-acid nose; layers of flavour, complex lemon butter / lacking structure, a little simple – youthful volume of flavour / good length but clumsy.
MORE THAN \$50					
Bollinger Special Cuvée Brut	18.5	12.0	France	95.00	Antique gold; savoury yeast characters, rich and complex; full, mouth-filling flavour – a lovely flavoursome wine.
Moët & Chandon Grande Vintage 2000	18.5	12.5	France	120.00	Golden yellow with a fine bead; toasty nose, not overdone; well balanced with fruit – complex yet elegant, youthful yet mature, a wonderful wine.
Piper-Heidsieck Brut	18.5	12.0	France	60.00	Pale gold with a fine, persistent bead; hint of sweetness and toastiness; lots of flavour, lemon, lime, citrus – lively and fresh but with underlying complexity.
Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin 2002	18.5	12.0	France	120.00	Light yellow; fruit driven and full of flavour; complex, rich and elegant yet still youthful – great mouthfeel and length.

WINE (IN RANK ORDER WITHIN PRICE BRACKETS)	SCORE OUT OF 20	ALCOHOL (%)	ORIGIN	PRICE (\$)	TASTING NOTES
G.H. Mumm Cordon Rouge Brut	17.5	12.0	France	53.00	Mid-yellow colour; complex, lemony nose; well balanced and shows good length – a nice elegant style.
Pol Roger Reserve 1999	17.5	12.5	France	120.00	Mid-yellow colour; elegant and complex nose; toasty character showing through – powerful and yeasty, a lovely flavour and texture.
Billecart Salmon Brut Reserve	17	12.0	France	118.00	Bright yellow with a fine bead; delicate nose, yeast and bread; well-balanced fruit and good length – light bodied, elegant, fresh and zesty.
Moët & Chandon Brut Impérial	17	12.0	France	80.00	Bright yellow; citrus fruits showing through; medium bodied and smooth palate – a plain and simple wine.
Arras Chardonnay Pinot Noir 2002	16.5	12.5	Australia	68.00	Pale yellow with a soft bead; cheesy, funky nose; lychees and fruit on palate – it's all there, just lacks a touch of Frenchness.
Bollinger Brut La Grande Année 1999	16.5	12.0	France	205.00	Yellow colour; subdued, slightly oxidised nose; complex palate but an unpleasant aftertaste – flavoursome and powerful, but clumsy.
Perrier Jouet Grand Brut	16	12.0	France	74.00	Yellow with fine bead; hint of sweet fruit on nose; light style with balanced fruit – a nice wine but lacks complexity.

SPARKLING ROSÉ

Carrington Blush Special Cuvée	16.5	11.5	Australia	8.50	Rose pink; some lemon but lacks nose; good fruit but a bit dry on finish – a sound, solid wine but lacking sweetness and complexity.
Hardys Regional Reserve Pink	16.5	11.5	Australia	8.50	Coral pink; light and refreshing fruit upfront; muscaty palate – youthful, fruity and elegant.
Jacobs Creek Sparkling Rosé	16	11.5	Australia	12.00	Light coral pink; fresh fruit nose, but bland; strawberries and cream dominates – a bit dull and uninteresting.
Orlando Trilogy Pinot Noir Chardonnay Pinot Meunier	16	12.0	Australia	15.00	Coral pink; berry fruit nose; a bit of age and complexity but an unpleasant finish – some positive characters but a touch empty.
Yellowglen Pink	16	11.0	Australia	12.00	Bright pink; dull nose; moderate level of sweetness, strawberries and cream – drinkable but clumsy.
Omni Pink 750ml	15.5	11.0	Australia	12.00	Pale salmon pink; flat nose character; full mouthfeel, strawberry and berry fruits – not much fruit or flair.

Mixed emotions

Moët & Chandon Rosé Impérial	18.5-14	12.0	France	110.00	Amber-orange colour; mature, rich, flavoursome / oxidised characters; long, elegant, strawberry and cherry fruit / short and bitter finish – a lovely drink, mature yet youthful / not pleasant, oxidised.
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SPARKLING RED

Yellowglen Red	17	12.0	Australia	12.00	Light cherry red; red fruits and spice; sweet fruit but not cloying – a touch simple but a lovely drink, a good food wine.
Seaview Sparkling Shiraz	16.5	13.0	Australia	9.50	Medium deep red; red fruits and spice; sweeter style and short in length – young but worthy.
Wyndham Estate Bin 555 Sparkling Shiraz	16.5	13.5	Australia	14.00	Cherry-red colour; rustic spice nose; good fruit all the way, good length – a wine with a good balance between fruit and acid.
Banrock Station The Reserve Sparkling Shiraz	16	14.0	Australia	10.00	Cherry-red colour; sweet fruit and pepper nose; sweet, long palate with some complexity – a good food wine.
McGuigan Black Label Sparkling Shiraz	16	12.5	Australia	10.00	Cherry-red colour; fruity nose with a slight liquorice character; good length and fruit driven – a well-balanced wine with some complexity.
Omni Red (1L)	16	14.0	Australia	11.00	Deep red; red fruits and spice; nice fruit, balanced – lacks punch, maybe slightly tired.
Seppelt Original Sparkling Shiraz 2005	15.5	13.0	Australia	24.00	Dark red colour; red fruits and herbs; tannic finish, short length – a balanced wine but marred by astringent tannins.

Mixed emotions

Andrew Garrett Sparkling Burgundy	18.5-15.5	13.0	Australia	15.00	Mid red colour; spicy nose / forward fruit; subtle red fruits character / mouthful of tannin – lots of lovely characters / lacks weight.
D'Arenberg The Peppermint Paddock Sparkling Red	17-15	14.0	Australia	28.00	Purple red; spicy nose / smoky, gamy; vibrant red fruit and spice flavours / mean, green and barely drinkable – a good food wine / out of balance.

USING THE TABLE Price This is a median price calculated from prices at five Sydney and two online wine retailers in September 2009. We found some big price variations, so it's worth shopping around and keeping an eye out for specials. **Tasting notes** These are compiled from the experts' tasting notes. They refer to the wine's colour and appearance; nose; palate – overall impression. Combined with the scores, they should give you a good indication of the wine's style, aroma and flavour. Where the experts can't agree, the wine is a "mixed emotion" and includes a range of scores and two sets of tasting notes reflecting the tasters' divergent views.



STORY KARINA BRAY

Health facts and fiction

CHOICE serves up 10 common red herrings about health to keep you on track this summer.

NUTSHELL

>> Many commonly held myths about regarding health and lifestyle.

>> There are no quick fixes to counter overindulging during the festive season.

Just because you're on holidays, there's no reason to take a break from a healthy lifestyle. But widely held myths about health may mean that even if you think you're doing the right thing, you're actually doing yourself – and your body – a disservice.

Here are some common misperceptions, with a healthy dose of reality mixed in.

Myth #1: Mixing drinks gives you a worse hangover

If you start the Christmas party with a couple of glasses of champagne, followed by red wine and a brandy nightcap, will you be worse off than if you'd just stuck to one type of drink? All evidence says no – it's the type and total amount of alcohol that counts, not the number of different sources.

Dark drinks such as red wine, whisky and brandy will make you feel worse because, in addition to the alcohol, they contain larger amounts of substances called congeners – toxic impurities formed during fermentation. Sticking to light-coloured and fewer drinks, interspersed with plenty of water, is the key to minimising the chances of a hangover.

If the horse has already bolted, you can ease your discomfort with painkillers and rehydrate with plenty of water or sports drinks (which can also help replenish lost electrolytes). There's anecdotal evidence that eggs (which contain cysteine, a helpful amino acid), toast with Vegemite (which will replace salts, sugars, B vitamins and other lost nutrients) and some coffee or caffeinated beverage (although not too much, because caffeine also dehydrates) can help perk you up.

Verdict Prevention is more effective than cure.

Myth #2: One drink a day is better than none

Over the years, researchers have managed to convince many of us that one alcoholic drink a day is better than none – that is, light drinkers will live healthier, longer lives than teetotallers. While this has been welcome news for drinkers, as more research comes in experts are increasingly divided on the benefits of even a single drink a day. It seems in many cases, the people who say they don't drink are likely to have health issues – possibly even caused by drinking in the past – that caused them to stop drinking. When Australian researchers reanalysed some of the data, taking this into account, they found there was no advantage for light drinkers over life-long teetotallers.

Verdict Enjoy the odd glass of wine, but don't drink for the sole purpose of obtaining health benefits. And just because one glass of wine is OK, it doesn't mean two or more is better!

Myth #3: A detox regime can rid your body of the festive season's excesses

"Detox" or "liver cleansing" diets and kits that promise to purge your body of toxins are especially popular in the New Year. They can also look like an appealing antidote to weeks of too much alcohol and rich food – a fast track to the new trim, glowing you. However, our bodies are already well equipped with self-cleansing mechanisms, and detoxification occurs on a continual basis in the body. The lungs, kidneys, liver, gastrointestinal tract, skin and >



Air-popped popcorn is a healthy snack food, but movie popcorn is another matter altogether – so stick to the smallest size.



< immune system all play a part in effectively removing or eliminating toxins. Symptoms such as bloating and fatigue may be an indication of an unhealthy lifestyle, or a lack of vital nutrients due to poor eating habits – not of toxin build-up.

Verdict A week or two in January on a detox program won't dissolve a year of health sins.

Myth #4: Antioxidant supplements can replace fruit and vegetables

Popping a few antioxidant vitamins and drinking loads of fresh juice will make up for unhealthy eating habits over the party season. Or will it?

There's strong evidence that a diet high in fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and tea can help protect against cancer, heart disease, diabetes and other health problems. These plant-based foods are a rich source of antioxidants, and supplement manufacturers would have you believe that by extracting the antioxidants and putting them in a pill, you can obtain the same benefits as eating a healthy diet. However, the evidence also suggests that taking antioxidant pills offers little health benefits – nor does drinking juice contribute the same antioxidant effect as having the equivalent whole fruit or vegetables.

Possible reasons include that antioxidants in whole foods are digested differently to pills and juice; there may be synergistic effects with other nutrients in the plant; and behaviour of antioxidants in a test tube is completely different from that in the body.

Verdict Popping antioxidant pills or sculling juice definitely doesn't replace a diet rich in fruit, vegetables and wholegrains.

Myth #5: Regular exercise lets you have your cake and eat it too

Exercise contributes a lot to good health, benefiting muscular strength, cardiovascular fitness, blood pressure, cholesterol levels and bone strength. It's particularly important for maintaining muscle mass if you're dieting. However, many people overestimate the kilojoule-burning benefits of exercise.

When you consider it takes the average person half an hour of brisk walking just to exercise off a Caramello Santa, or a one-hour jog for a slice of White Christmas and some egg nog, it's easy to see that the energy intake from more than one or two small treats a day is going to exceed the energy burnt in an average exercise regime.

DID YOU KNOW?

What really causes ulcers?

While it's fun for many people, the holiday season can be very stressful for others. Combined with party food of questionable nutritional value, not to mention late nights and too much alcohol, you may be wondering about its impacts on your health.

Peptic and duodenal ulcers were once believed to have been caused by stress and lifestyle factors, including spicy food. However, pioneering research by two Australian scientists (who netted the 2005 Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology) pinned the blame on bacteria called *Helicobacter pylori*, responsible for most – though not all – ulcers. The bacteria are present in most people and can sometimes lead to the ulceration. Ulcers caused by *H. pylori* can be treated with a regime of antibiotics and acid inhibitors.

In addition to over-rewarding exercise with treats, studies have found that when people have exercised a lot they tend to compensate by moving less throughout the rest of the day.

Verdict You can't outrun a bad diet.

Myth #6: You should brush your teeth straight after drinking fizzy drinks to prevent tooth damage

Acidic drinks such as juice, sports drinks, wine and carbonated soft drinks (including "diet" soft drink) temporarily soften the tooth's enamel, as do acidic foods such as vinegar, pickles and many fruits.

This is known as dental erosion, and is a different issue from decay or cavities, which are caused by bacteria feeding off sugars in your mouth. The enamel's hardness is gradually restored with the help of saliva. However, softened enamel may be abraded if you brush your teeth too soon after consuming acidic food and drink, and experts recommend you wait at least an hour before brushing your teeth. Snacking and grazing on party food also makes it difficult for the enamel to recover. Reducing your consumption of acidic foods and drinks to meal times can help, as can swishing water around your mouth, eating a piece of cheese or chewing sugar-free gum.



Verdict Wait before you brush.

Myth # 7: The appendix is a redundant organ

Commonly thought to be a vestige of our bark-eating days, the appendix is largely regarded as redundant and therefore unnecessary. This, combined with the potential high costs of evacuation and threat to life if people over-wintering in Antarctica (and similar long-term circumstances of isolation) were to contract appendicitis, has led to routine prophylactic appendectomies being carried out. After all, if you don't need your appendix, it's better to be safe than sorry.

However, scientists have recently come up with an explanation of its function, which is a storehouse for beneficial gut bacteria. It's thought these bacteria replenish stocks usually present in the gut if they're wiped out by gastrointestinal diseases such as cholera and dysentery. While it's possible for these bacteria to be replenished by contact with other people, in sparsely populated areas – or eras – the appendix is or was more important. Even today, in societies where gastrointestinal disease is common – including some developing countries – the appendix may still have a valid and important function.

Verdict While it's not redundant, in modern Australian society your appendix is probably not necessary.

Myth #8: Popcorn is a healthy snack food

When you hit the movies these holidays – perhaps for the air-conditioning as much as the movie – you may be tempted by the snack bar on the way in. And if you've tuned into the news recently, you may have heard researchers have discovered that popcorn, which is a wholegrain, is one of the richest cereal sources of polyphenols – antioxidants offering

numerous health benefits.

However, movie popcorn is another matter, and it's what's added to the grain – the salt and “butter” – that rings alarm bells. A small 25g serving at one cinema chain contributes one-quarter of your daily saturated fat allowance, and sodium about 13%. Granted, it's a better bet than a choc-top – one of those heart-stoppers will give you more than half of your recommended daily saturated fat intake. Home-cooked or air-popped popcorn, even some microwave packs, are healthier options.

Verdict Popcorn can be a healthy snack food, but movie popcorn should be regarded as a treat – just stick to the smallest size and have it with water.

Myth #9: Recirculated cabin air on planes will make you sick

If you're worried about getting sick from breathing recirculated air on planes, you're not alone. However, studies have shown it's not a reasonable concern. While people who travel on planes may be more likely to get sick than non-travellers, this is likely due to dry air and a proliferation of germs in a small space (such as being coughed on by the person next to you or touching things sick people have touched), rather than germs being spread through the air supply. Jet lag, stress, poor diet while travelling and fatigue can also affect health. The low humidity can lead to a dry throat and cough, making people think they've picked up a bug when they haven't. Using a hand sanitiser and drinking plenty of fluids while onboard is a good idea.



Verdict Recirculated cabin air alone doesn't make passengers sick.

Myth #10: Bottled water is a safe alternative to tap water when you're travelling

In some countries, especially developing countries, travellers are advised not to drink tap water and stick to bottled water instead. However, in some cases bottled water may simply be untreated tap water. Even “filtered” water may not have had all the baddies removed. Buying a well-known brand of water is the best bet, but check the seal carefully for tampering – sometimes empty bottles are refilled with tap water and sold to unwitting tourists. You might also consider carrying disinfection tablets and a couple of bottles if you're venturing off the beaten track – ask for advice at a hiking and camping store.

Verdict Not all bottled drinking water is safe. ■





NUTSHELL

>> More than half the suppliers contacted by CHOICE shadow shoppers quoted a higher price if the shopper said they were getting married. >> Our shoppers were often directed to pricey "wedding packages" that include a lot of unnecessary extras, and don't allow for individual requirements.

STORY KATE BROWNE

Wedded bli\$\$

Is it true that whenever the word 'wedding' is mentioned, the price jumps? CHOICE finds out.

Despite all the economic doom and gloom, the wedding industry has remained recession-proof. Last year, the number of Australian couples tying the knot hit a 20-year high, and this year Australian couples are expected to spend an estimated \$3.7 billion on their big day.

While the wedding industry is worth big bucks, it's also one that cops a lot of criticism, particularly when it comes to pricing. We've all heard the story of the friend of a friend who was quoted one price for a cake, only to have it double once they mention it's for a wedding. When you're new to the world of reception venues, photographers, cakes, flowers, hire cars and entertainment, can you ever be sure you're paying what you should?

CHOICE shadow shop

CHOICE set out to prove – or disprove – the theory that brides-to-be pay more. To see if the price jumps when the W-word is mentioned, CHOICE commissioned two shadow shoppers to organise quotes for identical events. Both events had the same number of guests and identical requirements in terms of venue, photographer, hire cars, entertainment and a cake. Florists were asked to provide quotes on flowers to decorate the venue only – no bridal bouquets were requested. The photographer was told they were only needed for the reception and not the ceremony, as this was being done by a friend. Businesses were selected in Melbourne and Sydney to provide a good cross-section of suburbs and demographics. In total, 60 businesses were contacted – 30 in each city – and each was contacted twice, once by our bride and once by the birthday girl.

Wedding enquiries were conducted first. Our prospective bride made a phone call to ask about pricing and request a quote. Once this enquiry was completed, the second shopper called the same business with exactly the same request, but claimed the event was a 40th birthday. The second call was made approximately one week after the first call, and for the cake, flowers and car enquiries, the birthday shopper used the same details confirmed for the wedding scenario.

As suspected, we discovered that those planning on saying "I do" pay more. More than half the wedding suppliers approached by our shadow shoppers quoted a higher price for the bride than the birthday girl.

Reception venues

If you're planning a wedding, choosing a venue is a huge decision. Apart from gobbling up the biggest slice of your wedding budget, the venue is likely to be responsible for feeding and watering your guests, not to mention setting the mood for the whole day.

It's likely you'll be charged more if you're having a wedding. Of all the venues we approached (with the exception of two) the price quoted per head was higher for the wedding than the birthday, despite having identical requirements – with one Melbourne venue wanting to charge almost double for the wedding.

We also found that overall, reception venues don't offer a lot of flexibility in terms of what is available.

Most have wedding packages, with little tailoring to suit individual needs, and they generally cost a lot more.

Many people contacted by CHOICE commented on this one-size-fits-all approach. "You do see a lot of people getting pushed

Venue hire per head tends to be more for weddings than for other occasions.

into doing the same things; often the wedding options are packaged up and there's not much opportunity to deviate from what's on offer," says Terri Psiakis, author of wedding survival guide *Tying the Knot Without Doing Your Block*. "People also seem to feel pressured into having what their friends had. As a result, you can go to five different weddings from one circle of friends and they're all the same. It's difficult to remember whose wedding was whose."

Wedding celebrant Megan West told CHOICE she hears about many venues charging extra for weddings when she meets with clients and conducts wedding ceremonies. "I encountered one reception centre in the Hunter Valley that automatically charges \$20 a head more for weddings than other functions. When asked why, they said it was for 'insurance' and because weddings are more demanding."

Another charge to be aware of is the additional fee some venues impose to have your wedding ceremony onsite. Some charge an additional flat fee, while others charge per guest. One CHOICE staff member was recently quoted an additional \$25 per head for her 70 guests if she wanted to have her ceremony onsite at one venue. When she queried what this extra \$1750 covered, she was told it was for 20 chairs, a table, a piece of carpet and an archway.

Photographers

For many couples, capturing the memories of their wedding day is critical – and there are plenty of photographers willing to do this. At some weddings >

Our shadow shopper found an inflexible, one-size-fits-all attitude to wedding photography packages.



CASE STUDY

Don't blow the budget

When George Paul was booking a venue for his wedding, he remembered a business dinner he'd organised a few years earlier. At the time he met a woman who was booking a similar menu at the same place for her daughter's wedding. "When we compared what we'd been quoted, the lady organising the wedding had been quoted a lot more."

With this in mind, he called

the venue he was interested in to get quotes for his own wedding, describing the event as a birthday party. He says the organisers were fine with his requests and sent him a quote. Later, when he confessed he and his partner planned to marry on the day, he says the staff went into a flap, claiming a wedding required a different menu because there were "different packages for weddings". When he asked why, the response

was "that's just the way we do it".

When George checked the wedding package, the quote was about 60% more than the original for the same venue, drinks and a slightly different menu. "I told them I only wanted to pay for the birthday package they originally provided. Once they recognised they'd been caught out, they agreed to let me have the wedding there at the price I was originally quoted, no extra cost."

Be clear on what you want and what you're willing to spend for your wedding – don't be afraid to haggle.

CASE STUDY

Hair at what price?

Chandra Pile, from South Australia, was quoted a price when she booked a hairdresser for herself and her bridesmaids for the morning of her wedding day. On the actual day, however, when the hairdressers had completed their work, Chandra was told she would have to pay what she says was "almost double" the price of the quote.

When she asked why, she was told it cost more for the staff to come in to the salon on a Sunday and that she would need to pay cash straight away. Having been put on the spot, she was left with little choice but to pay up.

Chandra's advice to anyone planning a wedding is to pay for everything in advance to avoid a similar situation.



< the photographer spends hours with the couple before the ceremony and during the nuptials, travelling offsite for more formal shots of the bridal party, and capturing all the revelry at the reception. Photographers are also usually responsible for any post-production work and developing a wedding album.

In order to keep requests identical during our shadow shop, the bride was instructed to tell the photographers that she only wanted photos taken at the reception, as a relative would be capturing the ceremony. Both scenarios required a photographer to take photos at the venue for four hours, with a mix of posed and informal shots to be delivered on a CD.

Our shadow shoppers collected some extreme discrepancies from the 10 photographers approached. Only three photographers offered the same rate; and

only two had a small difference with most quotes calculated by the hour. However, disappointingly four businesses quoted a much higher price for the wedding. One photographer wanted to charge a massive \$2200 more for the wedding by insisting there was only an all-day rate for weddings, despite our shopper emphasising she didn't want or need this. Yet when our birthday girl called, the same business was quite happy to provide an hourly rate

at a reasonable price.

In the other cases, photographers quoted up to 150% more for the wedding, again only offering expensive all-day rates.

As with venues, wedding photography packages were offered with little flexibility and in most cases priced at a minimum of four to five hours. On several occasions, our bride said she didn't feel the staff really listened to her specific requirements. Once again, the one-size-fits-all approach applies once the W-word is mentioned.

Cakes

If our results are anything to go by, it's worth shopping around for any kind of cake. Both our bride and birthday girl requested a modern style, white chocolate mud cake, decorated with fresh flowers and big enough to feed 80 people. Of the 10 cake shops approached, two quoted a much higher price for our bride, with one quoting 75% more than the same cake for the birthday girl. Interestingly, on two occasions the birthday cake quote was 11% more than the wedding cake. The cakes themselves ranged in price from \$160-\$475 depending on the store, so our advice is not to let on that it's for a wedding and be sure to shop around.

Flowers

When it comes to flowers, a wedding is usually going to have different requirements to a birthday party. With this in mind, our bride was instructed to request flowers to decorate the venue only. As the types of flowers suggested by the florists could vary, our birthday girl was scripted to ask specifically for the same flowers that had been suggested by the florist to the bride.

Of the 10 florists contacted, half quoted more for the wedding while the other half quoted more for the birthday – certainly an indication that it's a good idea to shop around if you're looking to order flowers for any kind of event.

Hire cars and entertainment

The car hire companies we contacted were also more likely to charge more for weddings, with seven of the 10 businesses quoting more for the wedding scene. Two Sydney businesses even quoted our bride 54% more for the same car and the required hours. And just like reception venues and photography, car hire had minimum hourly rates.



Don't let on that the cake you're buying is for a wedding.

It's worth shopping around when ordering flowers for any event.



For entertainment, our shadow shoppers' request for both the wedding and birthday party was simple: a DJ to play for four hours, with a selection of tunes that guests of all ages would want to dance to. However, our identical request resulted in less than identical quotes. Six of the 10 businesses our shadow shoppers contacted quoted a higher rate for the wedding, with one quoting 87% more for the wedding.

Selling the \$33,000 dream

In 2008, the average cost for a wedding in Australia was \$33,349. With so much money to be spent, it's hardly surprising there's a growing number of wedding suppliers eager for a piece of the action.

Glenn Findlay, managing director of Australian Bridal Service, which runs bridal expos and provides an accreditation service for industry providers, says his office receives up to 30 complaints a week from unhappy brides. "There are a lot of new players in the industry who have appeared over the past two years who don't have a professional approach. Generally, these businesses aren't accredited by our business so we can't help the people who call to complain. And unfortunately there is no governing body for the industry." He says car hire companies, photographers and make-up artists are typically the most complained-about services, many of whom are start-up amateurs hoping to cash in on couples ready to spend up on their big day.

Attack of the Bridezilla

Industry experts told CHOICE that wedding customers are often far more demanding than other customers, and suggest this is why so many suppliers are inclined to charge extra. John O'Meara, Chairman of the Australia Bridal Industry Association, argues that in some cases charging a price premium is justified. "A wedding is a one-off, and as a result people are often very

demanding and very high-maintenance customers. In many cases, a wedding customer is going to expect so much more in terms of quality and service than another customer. Most of the suppliers are small operators and they have to work hard to make the client happy.

"Take hire cars. If you were going to the footy and you hired a car you'd be happy if it turned up on time and got

you there. For a wedding, the bride will probably want to meet you once or twice, sit in the car and go for a test drive. On the day, the car will have to be spotless, turn up early and be prepared to run late. It's a totally different kind of service for a high-maintenance customer."

West sees a lot of overstressed brides with sky-high expectations. "Some brides are so stressed about trivial things like place cards that they lose sight of what their wedding is really about. I had one woman who was so obsessed with everything being perfect she actually forgot to write her wedding vows!"

CHOICE VERDICT

Our shadow shop shows it doesn't pay to mention the word "wedding" if it really isn't critical. CHOICE believes that for services such as a DJ and car hire there should be no difference in the quality of the service provided or the cost, whether it's your wedding day, a birthday or any other event. For reception venues, cakes, flowers and photographers it depends on your individual requirements and the contract you enter into with the provider – however, it can still pay to get creative. One CHOICE member (see Don't Blow the Budget, page 35) saved a fortune by asking for a catering quote from a venue before disclosing the event was a wedding.

If you're planning a wedding, be clear on what you are willing to spend, don't be afraid to haggle and always be sure to shop around. ■

NOT HAPPY?

There is no governing body for the wedding industry in Australia, but consumers can take complaints to the Office of Fair Trading in their state or territory.

CASE STUDY

Wedding bouquet or funeral flowers?

Terri Psiakis, comedian and author of wedding survival guide, *Tying the Knot Without Doing Your Block*, says she was warned many times by friends not to let on she was planning a wedding when shopping around for flowers and cakes, as she'd likely be charged more. To test the theory, Psiakis called a local florist and asked the cost of a wedding bouquet made with certain flowers. A few weeks later, she called the same florist and asked for an identical bouquet, but this time said it was for a funeral. The price difference was astonishing, with the bridal bouquet costing almost \$200 more. "Apparently the bridal bouquet would have the stems wrapped up, but apart from that they were exactly the same. For some reason it seems to be cheaper if you say someone has died."



There should be no difference in the quality of entertainment provided.



STORY TANYA FONG

Underwater vision

CHOICE's user trial of swimming goggles will help you navigate the sea of brands, prices, shapes, colours and unusual features.

NUTSHELL

>> Price generally indicates the quality of a pair of goggles and how well they perform.
>> Goggles that have moulded or fixed frames and are anti-fog are more likely to perform better.

Faced with a sea of swimming goggles, how do you choose which pair to buy this summer? According to Alan Thompson, head national coach for Swimming Australia, "it's always a matter of trial and error, although you can narrow down your choice when you know what you want out of them." Unfortunately, this can be an expensive process.

To determine the differences among goggles and the features that matter to swimmers, CHOICE conducted a trial of 17 goggles priced between \$3 and \$50. Our last trial was back in 1975, when the most expensive goggles were \$3.50 and glass lenses and foam cushions glued around plastic eyecups were the norm. Today, you can pay up to \$50 and choose from hundreds of products for adults and kids available online and in stores. They come with newfangled features that promise unprecedented comfort and bamboozle you with technological acronyms you may never have heard of, such as TPE and TPR (see What to Look For, opposite).

Even though we all have unique face shapes and selecting a pair of goggles is a matter of trial-and-error, our trial found a few key features that will increase your chances of finding and buying a pair that provides good fit, as well as some canny buys.

Get what you pay for

With the exception of a couple of standout cheapies and the adjustable Eyeline Conquest, the top 10 goggles rated by our trialists cost \$20 or more, have moulded frames (See What to Look For, opposite) and are anti-fog. The top scorer is Italian-made Aqua Sphere Kayenne, which is also the most expensive pair on trial (\$50). Its straps and frame structure – entirely constructed from silicone so it wraps around your facial contours – is unconventional. "Its frames are a strange triangular shape, but they're very comfortable," said one trialist. Its high scores for ease of adjustment may be due to the

extra catch and ridges on the side straps that allow the strap to be loosened by clicking the catch or tightened with a single tug on either side of the goggles.

By contrast, our Best Buy is the high-scoring Torpedo Adult Omega at just \$7, available exclusively at Kmart. Its eyecups are made of thermoplastic rubber and scored the highest for watertightness. The other surprise find is the Tyr Stealth 2 (\$13), which has silicone eyecups and straps and scored second-highest for watertightness.

Trialists rated the Zoggs Predator, the second-most expensive pair of goggles on trial (\$43) which boasts of "panoramic wide-vision lenses", a little lower than the Zoggs Phantom (\$24) for watertightness and its fog-free ability. For comfort, however, the Predator scored much better than the Phantom. Zoggs marketing manager, Cynthia Chau, explained that both products are made of different materials and are manufactured differently. The Predator, for example, is a specialised product made for competitive swimming while Phantom is a recreational goggle designed for a broader target market.

CHOICE VERDICT

All the goggles in our What to Buy list (below) cost between \$7 and \$50 and cater to all budgets. The ones >

WHAT TO BUY

Aqua Sphere Kayenne	\$50
Eyeline Conquest	\$32
Tyr Nest Pro	\$30
Aqua Sphere Mako	\$25
Torpedo Adult Omega	\$7
Speedo Cyclone	\$40
Tyr Stealth 2	\$13
View Imprex	\$25
Zoggs Phantom	\$24
Zoggs Predator	\$43



PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE					FEATURES			PRICE (\$)
Brand/ model (in rank order of overall score)	Overall score (%)	Watertightness score (%)	Fog-free ability score (%)	Comfort score (%)	Ease of adjustment score (%)	NOSEPIECE			Price (\$)
						Anti-fog	Moulded or fixed frames	Adjustable frames	
Aqua Sphere Kayenne	86	85	90	84	85	✓	✓		50
Eyeline Conquest	81	85	91	76	73	✓		✓	32
Tyr Nest Pro	81	80	83	76	87	✓	✓		30
Aqua Sphere Mako	79	78	90	72	76	✓	✓		25
Torpedo Adult Omega	79	93	87	72	66	✓	✓		7
Speedo Cyclone (A)	78	83	92	69	70	✓		✓	40
Tyr Stealth 2	78	90	85	72	65	✓	✓	✓	13
View Implex	74	83	90	71	51	✓	✓		25
Zoggs Phantom	74	83	79	63	72	✓	✓		24
Zoggs Predator	74	78	69	75	74	✓	✓		43
Eyeline Black Max	71	78	90	58	60	✓		✓	17
Eyeline Sunflash	64	80	62	61	53			✓	11
Speedo Kick	62	68	64	64	54			✓	13
View Pano Geo	62	73	60	61	53			✓	12
Speedo Mariner	60	53	86	48	55	✓		✓	25
Zoggs Otter	56	55	54	55	58			✓	11
Torpedo Adult Vista	49	48	53	50	46			✓	3

USING THE TABLE Score The overall score is made up of: Watertightness; Fog-free ability; Comfort and Ease of adjustment, all weighted equally. **Anti-fog** Based on whether the goggles' packaging claims to have this feature. **Moulded or fixed frames** refers to goggles that have nosepieces that cannot be adjusted. **Adjustable frames** are held together by one nosepiece, which can be adjusted to different lengths. **Separate nosepieces** Three individual nosepieces of different lengths are supplied.

TABLE NOTES Price Recommended retail as of November 2009, rounded to the nearest dollar. **(A)** Speedo Cyclone goggles are marketed for females. The scores did not differ even after we removed male trialists' scores from the analyses, so both female and male scores are included.

ABOUT THE REST

All the bottom seven goggles on trial have either PVC or TPE/TPR eyecups (see What to Look For, right) rather than silicone. "PVC is of a lower grade than TPR, which is very similar to silicone, while silicone performs much better than PVC and TPR," said Bob Wong, regional merchandiser of Power Sky International, manufacturer of the Torpedo goggles.

Generally, these goggles are not anti-fog and come with frames that are connected by adjustable nose pieces. They all cost less than \$20, suggesting price generally reflects quality as well as performance – although the Torpedo Adult Omega (\$7) and Tyr Stealth 2 (\$13) are notable exceptions.

"In most cases, it's true that you get what you pay for,"

says Mark Rheinbay, product manager for Aquanaut (the company that manufactures and distributes the Aqua Sphere goggles range). "We're in a very competitive industry. To the consumer, buying a pair of goggles is similar to buying toilet paper – there are different grades of the same material at different prices. Price is a good indicator but not the only one."

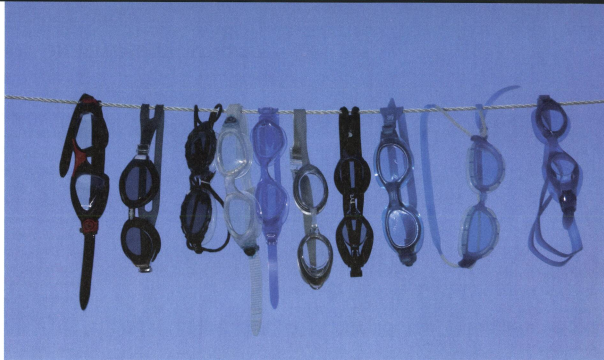
WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Moulded or fixed frame / adjustable frame Swimming goggles have either adjustable frames that consists of separate eyecups connected by adjustable and/or removable nosepieces, or moulded/fixed frames with non-adjustable nosepieces. In our trial, all seven goggles that had moulded or fixed frames made our top 10. Two of the goggles on trial, the Eyeline Conquest and Speedo Cyclone, come with individual nosepieces of three different sizes.

Silicone / non-silicone eyecups or gaskets The eyecups or gaskets have the most contact with your face and determine how comfortable and watertight the goggles are. Most of the higher-priced models have silicone eyecups. Some eyecups – typically those made with silicone – can be shallower than conventional ones, as we discovered when a few of our trialists reported that their eyelashes batted uncomfortably against the inner lenses. When you see TPR (thermoplastic rubber) or TPE (thermoplastic elastomer) on the goggles packaging, they simply refer to the synthetic material, which is a combination of plastic and rubber. Eyecups may also be made from polyvinylchloride (PVC), which is commonly found in the lower-priced goggles.

Anti-fog / no anti-fog lenses The inner surface of anti-fog goggle lenses are coated with plastic additives during manufacturing to prevent condensation. If your goggles are not anti-fog or if their anti-fog coating has worn out, you can spray and smear the inside of the lenses with anti-fog solution, available at most sporting goods retailers.

Provided
you take
good care
of your
goggles,
they
should last
you for
years.



L-R: Aqua Sphere Kayenne; Eyeline Conquest; Tyr Nest Pro; Aqua Sphere Mako; Torpedo Adult Omega; Speedo Cyclone; Tyr Stealth 2; Zoggs Phantom; Zoggs Predator & View Imprex.

< in our What to Buy list are all anti-fog. Most have silicone eyecups and moulded or fixed frames, and cost more than \$20. However, we did find a couple of exceptional buys for less than \$20 – the Torpedo Adult Omega and the Tyr Stealth 2. We can conclude that price is a good, but not the only, factor that reflects the performance of a pair of goggles. In our trial, features such

as anti-fog, what materials the eyecups are made of, and design also figure significantly in how watertight, fog-free, comfortable and easy to adjust a pair of goggles may be.

If you take good care of your goggles, they should last for years. Experts contacted by CHOICE say that rinsing out your goggles with tap water and storing them out of direct sunlight will prolong their effectiveness and lifespan. ■

HOW WE TRIAL

CHOICE selects 17 goggles from brands typically sold at department stores such as Kmart, sports goods retailers and swimming centres. We buy the highest and lowest priced, as well as the best-seller for each brand. Fifteen women and five men of varying ages and weights who are regular swimmers are recruited for the two-day trial. Each participant is given ample time to adjust their goggles before swimming 100 metres of freestyle at a moderate pace. After finishing the two laps, they rate the goggles on how easily adjustable, watertight, fog-free and comfortable they are. The results of the trial can be found in the table, page 39.

DID YOU KNOW?

Foam goggles were once popular because they were comfortable and inexpensive. However, they don't remain leak-proof for long and their watertightness and comfort levels decrease as the foam misshapens and deteriorates quickly from chlorine and sunlight. Competition and advances in technology making more durable goggles have rendered the foam goggles defunct.

TRIALIST COMMENTS

Aqua Sphere Kayenne

"The Rolls-Royce of goggles."

Eyeline Conquest

"It takes a bit of effort to adjust the straps at the side, but once that's done, it's very comfortable."

Tyr Nest Pro

"Comfortable and easy to adjust."

Aqua Sphere Mako

"Very nice and soft around the eyes."

Torpedo Adult Omega

"I didn't feel I had goggles on – very comfortable."

Speedo Cyclone

"Perfect fit for me."

"Suction was too strong on my eye sockets."

Tyr Stealth 2

"They're better-than-average goggles."

Zoggs Phantom

"Nice suction around the eyes."

Zoggs Predator

"Good field of vision."

View Imprex

"Very comfortable; felt like I wasn't wearing anything."

"It's hard to adjust and the frames are too small for me."

On test

Home entertainment, whitegoods, household and personal appliances – they're all tested here.

BARBECUES
PAGE 54



Fiona Mair
testing
barbecues in
the CHOICE
kitchen lab.

Inside

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60 Children's bikes

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CHOICE. MAKE THE RIGHT ONE.

CHOICE has its own testing laboratories, where experienced technical staff put products through their paces. We use test methods from Australian standards, and we develop our own to match the way consumers use a product in reality. We buy the products we test, to maintain our independence from manufacturers and so we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

CHOICE SHOPPER For the best deal on products where you see this logo, call 1300 360 655. Have the model name and number, the price you've been quoted and your CHOICE personal subscriber number.

CHOICE ONLINE / CHOICE VIDEO When you see one of these headings, there is more information about that story at www.choice.com.au.

CHOICE BEST BUY A product is a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Best Buys.



CHOICE GREEN BUY A Green Buy delivers both good quality and environmental performance at a comparatively low price. Not every test report has Green Buys.





STORY DENIS GALLAGHER

Thanks for the memory

Camcorders that use a memory card or hard drive are now the most popular option.

NUTSHELL

>> Entry level camcorders are now more expensive since the demise of DV tape.

>> The only camcorder choices for most users are either memory card or hard drive.

Removable memory cards and small hard drives are now the storage format of choice to capture video memories. A range of standard definition (SD) and high definition (HD) camcorders are available, and CHOICE tested 18 of the latest models.

Only a couple of DV tape models are still available in

Australia, kept mainly to satisfy the high-end market. We only tested Sony HD models, but Sony also has several SD camcorders (however the newest models were not available in time for this test). The cheapest camcorder models use **removable memory cards** (ranging from 1GB to 32GB) to store video and are a good option for aspiring young Spielbergs. For a few hundred dollars more,

WHAT TO BUY

STANDARD DEFINITION (SD)

60% Canon Legria FS22/FS21



ENTRY LEVEL

PRICE \$749 (FS22)/\$579 (FS21)

These Canons are made for young video enthusiasts and students, with a compact form factor and simple menu system. They also have by far the best sound quality of the SD models on test. The only difference between the two units is the FS22 has 32GB of internal storage (giving you nearly 3.5 hours of shooting in high quality model), while the FS21 has 16GB. If you're on a budget, the FS21 is better value and both support SDHC cards (see What to Look For, page 44).

Although there is no optical image stabiliser, the electronic stabiliser does an excellent job at keeping the effects of camera shake to a minimum.

Battery performance is excellent, with our tester able to get almost three hours of shooting on a full battery.

HIGH DEFINITION (HD)

74% Sony HDR-XR520V/HDR-XR500V



FOR THE INTREPID TRAVELLER

PRICE \$2299 (HDR-XR520V with 240GB)/\$2099 (HDR-XR500V with 120GB)

These camcorders are identical except for different hard drive sizes, and are among the heaviest camcorders on test. They should suit users wanting all the features and functions in one unit. A unique GPS tagging feature allows you play video based on where you made the video on a map shown on the large 81mm touchscreen. Footage saved to the PC can also be linked to Google Maps, so you can plot the course of your video-taking travels.

Unlike our recommended SD models, the difference in memory between the two Sonys is significant, so if you have the extra \$200 and believe a hard drive camcorder will suit your needs, the HDR-XR520V is the model for you.

a camcorder with **internal Flash memory** (ranging from 8GB to 64GB) can be handy. As these models use memory with no moving parts, they should be more robust than a hard drive camcorder. Almost a third of the camcorders on test record to a **hard disc**, with the ability to hold several hours of high-quality video, and all these models can record video and still images to a removable memory card as well. Models are available with a **mini-DVD** disc to store video, but CHOICE does not recommend these as mini-DVD seems to be dead-end technology.

What is HD?

The HD camcorders on test can record video at a resolution of 1920 x 1080 pixels, also known as 1080i, which can be shown at full quality on most new and recently purchased TVs. None can capture video at 1080p resolution, which is

considered the highest resolution currently available on a camcorder and not generally available outside a professional broadcast camera. All the models we tested can shoot video in a 16:9 aspect ratio, so the video will completely fill your widescreen TV.

All the HD camcorders and one SD model on test will play both digital video and audio through a High Definition Multimedia Interface (HDMI), which provides the best possible audio and picture quality. However, you'll need a HDMI connection on your TV and/or home theatre system to enjoy the benefits. Some of the HD camcorders use a special mini-HDMI connection, so if you don't get the cable with the camera, factor about \$50 extra into the overall price. The HDMI connection is for watching your video only; you can't transfer video from one device to another using a HDMI connection. >

At \$1099, the Canon Legria HF200 is a good all-round HD performer – although it does require additional memory cards.

HIGH DEFINITION (HD)

70% Canon Legria HF20



TRAVELLING LIGHT PRICE \$1399

This is a compact camcorder with better optical zoom range than most other HD models on offer, and delivers excellent picture quality and a fast, accurate autofocus performance. Video can be stored either on removable SD or SDHC memory cards or onto the 32GB internal flash drive.

69% Canon Legria HF200



ON A BUDGET PRICE \$1099

If your budget is around \$1000, the HF200 is probably the best HD option for the models on test. Its all-round performance is the same as the HF20, however as it doesn't have any internal memory, you'll need to carry a few SDHC memory cards in your bag.

ABOUT THE REST

SD CAMCORDERS

If your priority is more sharing video memories with the online world than just picture quality, you might want to look at one of the JVC or Panasonic camcorders as all provide a simple way to post video onto the popular YouTube video sharing website. When set to the online mode, these cameras automatically limit video segments to 10 minutes (the limit for YouTube videos), and a dedicated button allows you to simply put the camera into YouTube mode as soon as you connect the camera to a PC with an internet connection. The **JVC GZ-MG680** is the only SD model on test to provide a HDMI connection, a handy feature for showing digital video and audio on most flat-screen TVs.

HD CAMCORDERS

The **JVC GZ-900E** delivers very good video picture quality and performs well when taking still photos, but its battery performance is poor and some users may find the limited optical zoom of 5X frustrating when you're unable to get close to the action. Our testers found all the JVC models difficult to use compared with most other models on test.

The **Canon Legria HV40** and **Sony HDR-HC9** have been around for some time and represent some of the last remaining DV tape camcorders. The Sony delivered better sound quality, while the Canon produced good quality still photos and a better autofocus. The **Panasonic HDC-SD20K** performs OK and could be a good budget option, but you may be frustrated by its poor battery performance. The **Sony HDR-XR200V** is a fully featured hard drive camcorder, but is let down badly by its sound quality.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

System Do you want SD or HD, and do you want a hard drive or a model with removable memory?

External battery charger allows you to recharge one battery while recording with another.

Remote controls let you do most playback functions plus additional functions, some of which may only be available via the remote.

Video lamp/photo flash allows you to film or take still photos in low-light conditions.

Accessory shoe allows you to attach things such as an external microphone or video lamp to the camera.

Low-light recording Most models achieve fairly good picture quality even in quite poor light conditions. Some models have

an infrared lamp that allows you to make recordings even in complete darkness.

Removable memory type The most popular memory card option is Secure Digital (SD), with a higher capacity (HC) version of the card, known as SDHC, also available. MicroSD and miniSD are even smaller versions of the SD format, while Sony models use a proprietary card based on the Sony Memory Stick called MS Duo. **An input for an external microphone** usually provides better sound quality than a built-in one.

YouTube uploading Some models allow you to prepare your video for direct uploading to YouTube to a nominated account. Simply connect your camcorder to a PC with

internet access, press a button on the camcorder and it processes the video into portions less than 10 minutes.

Mac compatible If you want to use the iMovie program included with the Mac operating system, make sure the video camera you want to buy is compatible. The first few generations of camcorders using USB had problems working with the Mac OS in general and iMovie in particular.

Video transfer speed Look for speed ratings on the memory card such as "Class 4" or "Class 6"; the higher the number, the higher the speed. Cheaper memory cards may show a slower Class 2 speed rating, but may still be OK for use in an SD camcorder.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE										FEATURES					
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Overall score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Still photo score (%)	Versatility score (%)	Autofocus score (%)	Image stabilisation score (%)	Battery score (%)	Length of operation (minutes)	External battery charger	Remote control	Video lamp / photo flash	Accessory shoe	Removable memory type	PictBridge support	Image resolution
STANDARD DEFINITION (SD)																	
Canon Legria FS22	60	58	58	62	40	42	60	91	100	168		✓	✓/-		SDHC	✓	1.1
Canon Legria FS21	60	58	58	62	40	40	60	91	100	168		✓	✓/-		SDHC	✓	1.1
JVC GZ-MG680	48	41	53	49	44	52	56	19	91	131		✓	✓/-		microSD		0.8
JVC GZ-MG630	47	41	52	49	44	43	56	19	91	131			✓/-		microSD		0.8
JVC GZ-MS120	46	39	58	45	38	36	49	19	100	167			✓/-		SDHC		0.8
Panasonic SDR-H80	40	15	55	49	28	45	29	55	82	122	✓		-/-		SDHC	✓	0.8
Panasonic SDR-S26	34	15	57	37	27	32	24	55	31	71			-/-		SDHC	✓	0.8
HIGH DEFINITION (HD)																	
Sony HDR-XR520V	74	97	60	60	60	75	63	100	61	101		✓	-/-	✓	MS Pro Duo	✓	12
Sony HDR-XR500V	74	97	60	60	60	75	63	100	61	101		✓	-/-	✓	MS Pro Duo	✓	12
Canon Legria HF20	70	90	62	64	57	63	78	60	61	101		✓	✓/✓	✓	SDHC	✓	3.9
Canon Legria HF200	69	90	62	64	57	58	78	60	61	101		✓	✓/✓	✓	SDHC	✓	3.9
JVC GZ-X900E	67	84	56	64	68	41	72	91	38	78		✓	-/-		SDHC	✓	9.0
Sony HDR-HC9	66	83	57	51	61	64	68	78	64	104		✓	✓/-	✓	MS Pro Duo	✓	6.1
Canon Legria HV40	64	79	59	37	65	65	73	66	81	121		✓	✓/✓	✓	miniSD	✓	3.0
Panasonic HDC-SD20-K	62	74	61	54	62	60	49	78	36	76	✓		✓/✓		SDHC	✓	2.1
Sony HDR-XR200V	60	62	60	35	60	64	62	82	74	114		✓	-/-	✓	MS Pro Duo	✓	4.0
JVC GZ-HD300	58	69	55	46	43	55	73	73	43	83		✓	✓/-		microSD		3.1
JVC GZ-HD320	58	69	55	46	43	55	73	73	43	83		✓	✓/-		microSD		3.1

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Picture quality: 24%; Ease of use: 20%; Sound quality: 15%; Still photo: 10%; Versatility: 10%; Autofocus: 8%; Image stabilisation: 8% and Battery: 5%. **Features and system** See What to look for, above. **Price** Recommended retail, as of November 2009.

HOW WE TEST

To help with the high cost of testing, we share results between a number of consumer organisations worldwide.

Picture quality An expert viewing panel assesses the resolution, sharpness, colour and overall image quality of recordings in daylight and artificial light. They also assess macro recordings, recordings made in low light and (where applicable) at night.

Ease of use The panel looks at the instructions; ease of various functions; quality and functionality of the viewfinder, LCD monitor and remote control; portability of the camcorder and data transfer to a computer. They also measure the time delay between switching the recorder on and being able to use it.

Sound quality A panel assesses quality of speech and music recorded with the built and external microphone (if applicable). They also look at whether there is any sensitivity to wind noise.

Still photo The panel assesses the quality of photos taken in daylight, shutter delay and transfer speed of pictures via FireWire and/or USB. All models support USB version 2.0 for video and still photo transfers.

Versatility Each camera is assessed against a list of almost 50 features and functions.

Autofocus score Our testers assess the quality and speed of auto-focusing on subjects in close, mid- and long range.

Image stabilisation The picture stabilisation function is looked at, as well as

its effect on picture quality. The standard-definition camcorders are judged against a good-quality SD consumer camcorder, while the high-definition camcorders are judged against a broadcast-quality camcorder. Therefore, the SD and HD scores are not directly comparable.

Battery score/Recording time The panel measures how long the batteries last using a recording and playback test cycle. The camcorder is positioned on a slowly rotating turntable recording a well-lit room, with items at different distances, until the camera stops. During this time the camcorders are switched to full auto-recording mode, with the monitor, autofocus and image stabiliser switched on.

SPECIFICATIONS

Dolby digital / surround sound	Microphone input	HDMI	YouTube one-touch upload	Mac support (iMovie 6.5)	Viewfinder	System	LCD monitor size (mm)	Weight (g)	Dimensions (cm. H x W x L)	Optical zoom range	Optical image stabiliser	AVCHD recording	Touchscreen	Contact	Price (\$)
/-/-	✓ (A)			✓ (C)		Memory card + 32GB Flash	67	281	6.5 x 6 x 12.5	37				canon.com.au	749
/-/-	✓ (A)			✓ (C)		Memory card + 16GB Flash	67	281	6.5 x 6 x 12.5	37				canon.com.au	579
/-/-		✓	✓	✓ (C)		Memory card + HDD 120GB	67	346	5.5 x 7 x 12	35				jvc.com.au	879
/-/-			✓	✓ (C)		Memory card + HDD 60GB	67	346	5.5 x 7 x 12	35				jvc.com.au	749
/-/-			✓	✓		Memory card	67	288	6 x 6.5 x 12	35				jvc.com.au	449
/-/-			✓	✓		Memory card + HDD 60GB	68	351	6.5 x 7 x 12.5	70	✓			panasonic.com.au	719
-/-		✓	✓			Memory card	68	257	6.5 x 6.5 x 10.5	70	✓			panasonic.com.au	439
/-/	✓ (B)	✓		✓ (C)	✓	Memory card + HDD 240GB	81	589	8.5 x 7.5 x 14	12	✓	✓	✓	sony.com.au	2299
/-/	✓ (B)	✓		✓	✓	Memory card + HDD 120GB	81	589	8.5 x 7.5 x 14	12	✓	✓	✓	sony.com.au	2099
/-/	✓ (A)	✓		✓ (C)		Memory card + 32GB Flash	67	396	8 x 6 x 12.5	15	✓	✓		canon.com.au	1399
/-/-	✓ (A)	✓		✓		Memory card	67	395	8 x 6 x 12.5	15	✓	✓		canon.com.au	1099
/-/-		✓	✓	✓		Memory card	69	299	4.5 x 7 x 12.5	5	✓	✓		jvc.com.au	1999
-/-	✓ (A)	✓		✓	✓	HDV / Mini-DV	68	650	9.5 x 8.5 x 14	10	✓		✓	sony.com.au	1999
-/-	✓ (A)	✓		✓	✓	HDV / Mini-DV	67	607	10 x 8.5 x 14	10	✓			canon.com.au	1699
/-/		✓	✓	✓		Memory card	68	319	7 x 7 x 13.5	16	✓	✓	✓	panasonic.com.au	1099
/-/	✓ (B)	✓		✓ (C)		Memory card + HDD 120GB	67	473	8.5 x 7 x 13.5	15	✓	✓	✓	sony.com.au	1799
/-/-		✓	✓			Memory card + HDD 60GB	67	366	5.5 x 7 x 12	20		✓		jvc.com.au	1199
/-/-		✓	✓			Memory card + HDD 120GB	67	366	5.5 x 7 x 12	20		✓		jvc.com.au	1499

NOTES (A) 3.5 mm mini plug for audio and video. **(B)** Via docking station. **(C)** With some limitations (see Apple support www.apple.com.au).



NUTSHELL

>> Home theatre in-the-box systems generally produce low-quality sound.
>> You may do better buying the components separately, even though this will probably cost more.

The sound quality of home theatre-in-a-box products has been disappointing for some time, and the models in CHOICE's latest test are no exception. Of the six systems on test, only the Yamaha can produce sound rated OK by our expert listening panel – yet it still has some obvious faults and doesn't come with a DVD or Blu-ray player.

Also on test are two 5.1 systems we purchased anonymously from a specialist audio store in Sydney, to see if they perform better than in-the-box products for similar prices. The more expensive Denon AVR1509 + PSB HT1 system is the only one to get a good score in the technical testing, and the listening panel gave it their top score as well. However, the cheaper Denon AVR1509 + Jamo A102 system only managed similar scores to the best of the in-the-box systems with a DVD or Blu-ray player.

It appears the speakers from in-the-box systems are being compromised to allow manufacturers to include the player at a lower price. If sound quality is important to you, you're better off spending a little more and buying the components separately.

Standby energy

We've included the standby power usage for each system – see the table, right. These figures are a worst-case scenario with the main unit on standby, the wireless unit (if it has one) on standby and the three systems with an active subwoofer (both Denons and the Yamaha) in either "auto" or "on" mode. Turning the subwoofer or wireless unit off, while the main unit is on standby, will have a dramatic effect – all except the LG drop to about half a watt or less. At just over 2W, the LG isn't too bad, even though you can't turn off the wireless unit separately.

Don't turn it up

Home theatre needs to be loud, at least some of the time. Unfortunately, as the volume increases in the models on test, the sound starts to distort very quickly. The farther the speaker is from the listener, the more volume is required to maintain a constant level. To achieve 85dB (roughly the sound level you'd experience if you're outside in busy city traffic), none of the speakers in these models

STORY CHRIS RUGGLES

Big box, small sound

Most of these mid-priced home theatre systems are only OK at best.

can be positioned more than half a metre from the listener. The subwoofers can manage a little more distance, but not enough to be practical. We use a total harmonic distortion level of 2%, because most people will begin to hear distortion at levels greater than this. The Denon AVR1509 + PSB HT1 is the best, but its speakers would need to be 40cm from the listener; the worst is the Denon AVR1509 + Jamo A102, which would have its speakers just 11cm away.

Obviously, this isn't how these products are normally used, and in our listening tests the speakers are positioned 2m from the listener. It's little wonder our listening panel was generally underwhelmed by the quality of the sound. >

WHAT TO BUY

WITH BLU-RAY/DVD PLAYER

LG HB954WA \$1599

WITHOUT DVD PLAYER

Denon AVR1509 + PSB HT1 \$2000

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE		
	Overall score (%)	Listening panel score (%)	Frequency response score (%)
WITH BLU-RAY/DVD PLAYER			
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)			
LG HB954WA	58	53	56
Samsung HT BD1252W	56	51	55
Panasonic SC BT207	56	49	50
Samsung HT BD1255W	55	48	55
Panasonic SC PT875	55	46	50
WITHOUT DVD PLAYER			
Denon AVR1509 (A) / PSB HT1	66	65	70
Yamaha YHT-692AUB	61	60	60
Denon AVR1509 (A) / Jamo A102	58	51	58

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Listening panel score, Frequency response score and Ease of use score, weighted equally. The error carried

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Sound It's impossible to measure sound quality objectively in a store, but you can rely on your own hearing to a large degree. Take along a CD or DVD with music you know well, and don't be afraid to turn it up loud. Even though you may rarely listen to music at high volume, it will be very disappointing if the product you buy can't hack it when you throw a party.

Listen for smooth transitions from low to high notes. Low notes shouldn't be boomy or have only one tone, while highs shouldn't be harsh or screechy. If the store has a listening room, ask for the speakers to be placed in roughly the sort of

configuration they're likely to be in your room. Where it's not possible to hear the system before you take it home, get the store to agree to taking it back if you're unhappy with the sound.

Media formats If you're looking for a system with a DVD player, check it can handle all the music and video formats you're likely to play, and supports all the regions you're likely to buy DVDs from. If you have need for a particular format, it's a good idea to take a disc to the store to make sure it will play.

Connections Check the connections you'll need to hook up to your TV. If the system needs separate power for the subwoofer or rear speaker, do you have enough power points?

Check all the connectors and cables needed are included; they are in most of the boxed products on test, although the Yamaha is missing a subwoofer cable.

The two unboxed systems include speaker cables but only as an unbroken roll, which require cutting.

Wireless rear speakers will save you some cabling from front to rear, but you'll still need to supply power to them.

Remote controls should have all the necessary functions for using the system so you don't need to keep getting up to change settings.

Display and controls on the main unit should also be easy to understand and use so you can still use the system should you lose the remote.

6.1 and 7.1 systems The idea behind these systems is that extra speakers improve the system's ability to localise sounds and smooth transitions as sounds move around the room. This may be the case, but movies are mixed for 5.1 surround sound and extra speakers won't necessarily improve the quality of the sound.

Wall mounts can make it easier to place the speakers where they're most effective in the room. All systems on test except the LG are wall-mountable. The Yamaha only has mounts for the rear speakers because the front speakers are large and heavy.



Automatic calibration is a great help when setting up a system. The Panasonic, Yamaha and both Denon systems have this. It worked well for the Yamaha and Denons, but the Panasonic failed to notice a missing subwoofer.

FEATURES

Score type	Standby energy (W)	HDMI input/output	Network port (LAN)	USB / SD card	Radio tuner	Auto calibration	Lip sync	iPod dock	Contact	Price (\$)
	2.1	2/1	✓	✓ / -	AM/FM	✓	✓		www.lge.com.au	1599
	6.1	0/1	✓	✓ / -	FM	✓	✓	✓	www.samsung.com.au	1299
	6.5	0/1	✓	✓ / ✓	AM/FM	✓	✓	✓	www.panasonic.com.au	1649
	6.1	0/1	✓	✓ / -	FM	✓	✓	✓	www.samsung.com.au	1499
	6.8	0/1		✓ / -	AM/FM	✓	✓	✓	www.panasonic.com.au	1209
	8.7	2/1		- / -	AM/FM	✓		Optional	www.audioproducts.com.au	2000 (B)
	6.5	4/1		- / -	AM/FM	✓	✓	Optional	www.yamahamusic.com.au	1599
	7.9	2/1		- / -	AM/FM	✓		Optional	www.audioproducts.com.au (Denon), www.jamo.com (Jamo)	1400 (B)

isn't included in the overall score, so you can directly compare systems with and without a DVD player. **Price** Recommended retail, as of October 2009. **TABLE NOTES** na Not applicable. (A) Discontinued, \$799, replaced with Denon AVR1610 (\$899). (B) Price we paid, August 2009.

WHAT TO BUY

WITH BLU-RAY/DVD PLAYER

58% LG
HB954WA

PRICE \$1599
GOOD POINTS

- Speaker wires are colour-coded.
- iPod connection.
- Network connection for home networking, which will be useful when using BD-Live (Blu-ray titles with extra features delivered via the internet).
- USB connection for image or music playing and storage for BD-Live.
- Can play YouTube videos when connected to the internet.
- HDMI cable included.

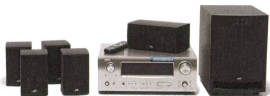
BAD POINTS

- Both rear "wireless" speakers require separate power.
- Subwoofer connection wire only 3m. This could limit where it can be placed in the room.
- No auto-setup system.
- Listeners say the subwoofer is "boomy", or easy to locate in the room, the centre speaker is muffled and the rears too loud.



WITHOUT DVD PLAYER

66% Denon
AVR1509* + PSB HT1



PRICE PAID \$2000
GOOD POINTS

- iPod connection available as optional extra.
- Slow but effective auto-setup system.

BAD POINTS

- No USB connection for image or music playing.
- No HDMI cable included.
- No network connection.
- Speaker wires not colour coded.
- Listeners like the balance of the system but say it lacks power.

ABOUT THE REST

WITH BLU-RAY DVD PLAYER

Neither **Samsung** product has an automatic setup, and their "wireless" rear speakers attach by wires to a central power unit. They have iPod, USB and network connections, as well as a Blu-ray DVD player, and an HDMI cable is included. They both lack bass and their centre speaker sounds muffled. The HT BD1252W's rear speakers are too soft and the HT BD1255W sounds artificial, with a lack of clarity in the treble.

The **Panasonic** models have a similar wireless setup to the Samsungs, and both have iPod and USB connections. The SC BT207 has a Blu-ray player and network connection; the SC PT875 has a standard DVD player. Neither comes with an HDMI cable and their automatic setup failed to pick up a missing subwoofer. The bass is "boomy" on both, and the panel

described the SC BT207 as dull. They liked the clarity of the upper frequencies produced by the SC PT875, but this didn't make up for the distorted bass.

WITHOUT DVD PLAYER

The **Yamaha** comes with a socket for an iPod connection but you have to buy the dock separately. You can add Bluetooth for an extra cost, and its automatic setup works well. No HDMI or subwoofer cable is included. The overall sound is OK, but it has a limited "sweet spot" (see How we Test, below) and can be harsh at higher frequencies.

The **Denon AVR1509 + Jamo A102**, like the recommended PSB system, will need an upgraded receiver as the one on test has been discontinued. However, it's the speakers that make most difference, and the panel liked its clarity but noted a gap between the bass and other frequencies.

HOW WE TEST

Listening Our tester, Antonio Bonacruz, sets up each system so the speakers are 2m from the listener at head height. He positions the subwoofer on the floor close to the left front speaker or in the best listening position. A meter is used to ensure the sound levels are the same.

Our three expert panellists then assess the quality of stereo sound, DVD surround-sound music and a number of DVD surround-sound movie sequences. They listen for distortion, how the subwoofer deals with low frequencies and the crossover from the speakers to the subwoofer at lower frequencies. They check the size of the "sweet spot" (where the sound balances and sounds best), and assess each system's ability to localise individual sounds so they appear to be coming

from a particular direction.

Frequency response shows the system's ability to produce tones across the spectrum of human hearing (from 20Hz to 20kHz). Failure to produce tones evenly can result in unpleasant sounds or even loss of some frequencies. Antonio also calculates the distance from the listener for each system, with a maximum total harmonic distortion of 2% at 85dB.

Ease of use includes the remote control, front panel display and controls, onscreen displays, radio tuning, ease of setting up and documentation.

Other Standby power is measured using specially calibrated meters. The tester plays a specially made DVD in each system to see how well they handle DVDs with imperfections.

* The Denon AVR1509 is discontinued. The replacement model AVR1610 sells for \$899.



STORY DENIS GALLAGHER

Guidance counsellor

The latest motor vehicle GPS systems tell you exactly where you need to be.

NUTSHELL

>> A new iPhone application offers an alternative to a dedicated car GPS device.
>> New features on the latest models make it easier to work through traffic.

Most car owners have a street directory, providing a handy way to get from point A to point B. But what if you have no idea where point B is and need clear directions along the way? Enter the car GPS – a pocket-sized device that can direct you to virtually any address in your capital city, as well as many rural destinations.

CHOICE tested 12 car GPS devices and three designed for use on a motorbike, to see which ones best guide you around the town and country. Unfortunately, our testing found performance drops off once you head out of the city, with only one car GPS scoring OK for country driving.

Car GPS devices are no longer a premium item for people spending several hundred dollars on the latest gizmo. Good units are now available for less than \$200, so it's handy to have one even if you only use it occasionally for holiday trips or driving to a destination in an unfamiliar area.

What's new with GPS?

Text to speech (TTS), where a GPS voice announces the full name of the road, is now reasonably common even on the units priced below \$200. Thankfully, several units also give you the opportunity to choose another voice if the default choice becomes too irritating. One thing to note

WHAT TO BUY

CAR GPS

Tom Tom ONE 140	BEST BUY	\$249
Tom Tom XL 340		\$299
Garmin nüvi 1350		\$399
Kogan Ezinav	BEST BUY	\$199
Garmin nüvi 1250		\$299
Garmin nüvi 1390		\$449

MOTORCYCLE GPS

Tom Tom Rider 2nd edition	\$799
Garmin zumo 550	\$999

about the huge variety of voices available to download onto your car GPS – including Homer Simpson, Darth Vader and John Cleese – is that only the completely computer-generated voices provide TTS. This means that while Homer or Darth Vader will tell you to turn left in 200 metres, only the computer-generated voice will tell you to turn left into Smith Street in 200 metres.

Another feature filtering down into the cheaper car GPS devices is lane guidance, where the unit recognises when >

DID YOU KNOW?

A proper mobile phone car GPS

While many people have used their mobile phones for directions while driving, applications such as Google Maps are not as effective as using a dedicated car GPS when it comes to speed, voice instruction and planning features such as altering a route or logging a trip. However, a new iPhone application from Tom Tom delivers most of the features and functions you would expect in a car GPS, for about \$100

on top of the price of the iPhone itself.

CHOICE tested the application for ease of use and examined its performance around the city, and it scored among the top-performing dedicated car GPS units. As with mobile phones, you cannot legally use the iPhone as a car GPS unless it is in a dedicated hands-free mount. Tom Tom has just released a mount that includes a dedicated GPS chip which

should improve the unit's overall performance. It also charges the unit and provides hands-free calling and music integration with the car's built-in sound system.

We'll conduct a full test of the unit with the latest version, providing advanced lane guidance and spoken street names [TTS], for our next car GPS test.



Unlike a car GPS, a motorbike device requires protection from the elements and the ability to make selections with gloves.

< you're on a multi-lane road and informs you when to start moving across to the exit lane well before making the turn. This may remove the sense of panic drivers feel in an unfamiliar area on a freeway. Onscreen arrows show you the best lane to be in when approaching a turn, or else a voice suggests when it might be time to move towards the far left or far right lane approaching an exit.

One feature that has not really caught on yet is 3D Landmarks, where well-known buildings are rendered in 3D supposedly to help you become more confident when you see them on the screen. However, for now only the Navman MY500XT and MY55T have this feature, and the number of objects rendered in 3D is very limited.

Bike GPS

Designing a GPS device to suit motorbikes is a very different challenge compared with a car; protection from the elements, as well as the ability to make selections with gloves, are just a couple of unique issues to address. The unit also has to be hardwired to the bike, as most do

not have an auxiliary power source (such as a cigarette lighter socket).

We reviewed the Tom Tom Rider 2nd edition, Garmin zūmo 550 and ALDI Go Cruise S350. Our two trialists preferred the Rider 2nd edition for ease of use, simple-to-follow directions and the ability to recalculate a route when the driver deviates from the suggested path. The zūmo came second, and both trialists rated the ALDI model last. However, at only \$199 the Go Cruise is one-fifth the price of the zūmo, and should it show up again in ALDI stores (never a sure thing) it's an OK option for bike riders on a budget. >

! We also tested the Tom Tom GO 930 and GO 730, which both scored very well, but unfortunately Tom Tom announced they were to be discontinued during testing. Our next test (in early 2010) will include a full test of the Tom Tom GO 750, GO 950 and XXL 540.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE							FEATURES						
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	Overall score (%)	City driving test score (%)	Country driving test score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Verbal instructions score (%)	Screen quality score (%)	Points of interest score (%)	Routing options: tolls / unsealed roads / highways	Announces school zones	Full-route display available	Lane guidance	Walking mode	Text to speech (TTS)	More than one TTS
CAR GPS														
Tom Tom ONE 140	80	81	58	88	90	87	96	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓	(A)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tom Tom XL 340	79	76	58	91	90	87	96	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓	(A)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Garmin nüvi 1350	77	75	50	95	90	97	78	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kogan GPS Navigator	76	72	67	81	83	80	91	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓	ns			✓	✓	✓
Garmin nüvi 1250	74	79	58	93	90	90	37	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓				✓	✓	✓
Garmin nüvi 1390	74	76	58	96	90	90	37	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Mio A350	66	88	17	86	83	70	72	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓	✓	✓				
Mio A430	66	84	17	89	88	70	72	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Navman MY500XT	66	74	25	74	90	77	86	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓	(B)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Navman MY30	64	78	25	71	85	77	73	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓	(B)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Navman MY55T	63	73	25	72	85	80	73	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓	(B)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Navig8r G35	52	70	17	57	80	50	45	✓ / - / - / -	(C)		✓	✓	✓	
MOTORCYCLE GPS														
Tom Tom Rider 2nd edition	83	77	75	87	90	93	96	✓ / - / ✓ / ✓		✓		✓		
Garmin zūmo 550	77	71	58	92	88	100	73	✓ / ✓ / ✓ / ✓	✓	✓			✓	
Go Cruise S350 (ALDI)	59	70	42	44	80	83	37	✓ / - / - / -		✓				✓

USING THE TABLE SCORES The overall score is made up of: In-car performance: 50% (city 25% / country 25%); Ease of use: 15%; Verbal instructions: 15%; Screen quality: 10%; Points of interest: 10%. For more, see How We Test, top right. **Features** For an explanation of features, see What to Look For, page 53. **Price** Recommended retail, as of October 2009.

HOW WE TEST

City As well as a home address, our tester Scott O'Keefe selects six destinations within Sydney – a railway station, airport, university, medical centre, golf course and sports complex – and starting from the same point, drives the route with all GPS models to see which locates the destinations correctly. He also compares actual travelling times and distances with those predicted by the GPS.

Country He selects a combination of wineries and hotels from the most recent *Hunter Valley Tourist Guide* to find out if the GPS provides accurate directions. Only locations with a proper street address shown in the guide are

selected – that is, house/lot number, street name and town name.

Ease of use Scott assesses how useful the instructions are, how easy it is to attach and remove the GPS from the windscreen and whether it vibrates during driving. He looks at how easy it is to use the menu structure on the touchscreen and, where supplied, if it is necessary to use a stylus to make entries.

Verbal instructions are assessed by listening to the quality of the voice, timing of turn and other instructions, specificity of the instructions, and whether it's possible to rely on verbal instructions alone without looking at the screen.

Screen quality Scott compares how easy it is to read the map and how clear the picture is in daylight and at night.

Points of interest He selects 20 points of interests, including a hospital, medical centre, airport, police, shopping centre, tourist attraction and so on, and rates the models based on how many POIs are found all over Australia.

Durability He checks the systems after three hours in a temperature-controlled oven at 60°C, to simulate being in a car on a hot summer's day.

Bike testers Two CHOICE staff motorcyclists assessed ease of use aspects of the bike GPS units applicable to use on a motorbike.

SPECIFICATIONS

Screen dimensions (mm, W x H)	Bluetooth	MP3 player	Photo / video / ebook	Trip log	SUNA included	SUNA as an optional extra	Mac support OSX	Map provider	Map update cost (\$)	Memory card type	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Weight (g)	Contact	Price (\$)
71 x 53			- / - / -				✓	Whereis	140		78 x 91 x 44	186	www.tomtom.com	249
97 x 57			- / - / -			✓ (\$249)	✓	Whereis	140		81 x 120 x 41	219	www.tomtom.com	299
97 x 56			✓ / - / ✓	✓		✓ (\$129)	✓	Whereis	99	microSD	75 x 121 x 15	162	www.garmin.com.au	399
96 x 54	✓	✓	✓ / ✓ / ✓	✓			✓	Sensis/NIMA	125	SD	82 x 120 x 15	162	www.kogan.com.au	199
71 x 53			✓ / - / ✓	✓		✓ (\$129)	✓	Whereis	99	microSD	75 x 93 x 16	132	www.garmin.com.au	299
97 x 56	✓		✓ / - / ✓	✓		✓ (\$129)	✓	Whereis	99	microSD	75 x 122 x 16	162	www.garmin.com.au	449
71 x 53			- / - / -	✓				Navteq	149		78 x 93 x 18	116	www.mio.com.au	199
97 x 56			- / - / -	✓		✓ (\$99)		Navteq	149		80 x 127 x 18	144	www.mio.com.au	299
104 x 59	✓	✓	✓ / ✓ / ✓	✓	✓			Navteq	149	microSD	85 x 133 x 15	188	www.navman.com.au	599
71 x 53			- / - / -	✓		✓ (\$99)		Navteq	149	microSD	79 x 93 x 18	123	www.navman.com.au	299
106 x 60	✓		✓ / - / -	✓	✓			Navteq	149	microSD	85 x 131 x 14	163	www.navman.com.au	499
71 x 53		✓	✓ / ✓ / ✓				✓	PSMA	59	SD	83 x 97 x 16	141	www.navig8r.com.au	159
70 x 53	✓		- / - / -				✓	Whereis	130	SD	97 x 113 x 52	316	www.tomtom.com	799
73 x 56	✓	✓	✓ / - / ✓	✓		✓ (\$129)	✓	Whereis	99	SD	98 x 119 x 40	301	www.garmin.com.au	999
70 x 53		✓	✓ / ✓ / ✓			✓		Whereis	ns	SD	92 x 111 x 52	231	www.aldi.com.au	199

NOTES ns Not stated. (A) Can announce when near to schools. (B) Speed sign alerts. (C) Speed alerts available via paid subscription.

WHAT TO BUY

CAR GPS



**BEST
BUY**

80% Tom Tom
ONE 140

PRICE \$249

GOOD POINTS

- Very good value for money.
- Very clear indication of roads and route with good size text.
- Names the streets, and roundabout exits are numbered first, second, etc.
- Printed manual included.

BAD POINTS

- Mount is not as adjustable as the more common ball-jointed type.
- Can't add live traffic (SUNA) as an option.



79% Tom Tom
XL 340

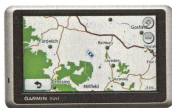
PRICE \$299

GOOD POINTS

- Very clear indication of roads and route with good size text.
- Names the streets, and roundabout exits are numbered first, second, etc.
- Printed manual included.

BAD POINTS

- Mount is not as adjustable as the more common ball-jointed type.



77% Garmin
nüvi 1350

PRICE \$399

GOOD POINTS

- Very clear indication of roads and route with good size text.
- Excellent screen visibility in bright sunlight (but not quite as good as the zumo).
- Excellent display of street names.

BAD POINTS

- Worst country performance of the recommended models.



**BEST
BUY**

76% Kogan
Ezinav

PRICE \$199

GOOD POINTS

- Soft carry case provided.
- Names the streets, and roundabout exits are numbered first, second, etc.
- Printed manual included.
- 3.5mm audio-out socket and FM transmitter inbuilt.

BAD POINTS

- Borderline sound quality. Voice sometimes has lengthy pauses mid-sentence.



74% Garmin
nüvi 1250

PRICE \$299

GOOD POINTS

- Very clear indication of roads and route with good size text.
- Names the streets, and roundabout exits are numbered first, second, etc.
- Excellent display of street names.

BAD POINTS

- Equal-worst score for points of interest.



74% Garmin
nüvi 1390

PRICE \$449

GOOD POINTS

- Very clear indication of roads and route with good size text.
- Names the streets, and roundabout exits are numbered first, second, etc.
- Excellent display of street names.

BAD POINTS

- Equal-worst score for points of interest.

MOTORCYCLE GPS



83% Tom Tom Rider 2nd edition

PRICE \$799

GOOD POINTS

- Very clear indication of roads and route with good size text.
- Soft carry case included.
- Bluetooth wireless helmet receiver kit included.
- Screen quality is very good, even from an angle.

BAD POINTS

- Let in much more water than either the Garmin zūmo or Go Cruise during our water resistance test.



77% Garmin zūmo 550

PRICE \$999

GOOD POINTS

- Very clear indication of roads and route with good size text.
- Soft carry case provided.
- External antenna socket.
- Excellent screen visibility in bright sunlight – best in this test.
- Excellent display of street names.

BAD POINTS

- Most expensive model on test.

ABOUT THE REST

The **Mio** models performed very well in the city, outscoring even our top overall performers. However, finding your way in the country could be a problem given the very poor country driving scores for both the A350 and A430.

The **Navman** units have a similar problem once leaving the city limits, although the MY500XT performed well when finding points of interest (POI) and is also the only unit on test using a capacitive touchscreen, which also means you have to use your finger instead of a stylus.

The **Navig8r** performed very poorly in the country driving test, and was also the most difficult to use.

At \$199, the Kogan Ezinav is one of our Best Buy car GPS.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Routing options You can program the GPS to exclude toll roads, unsealed roads or highways from the calculated route.

Announces school zone This feature provides warnings when approaching a school zone where speed limits are reduced. Some models announce when you are approaching a school, while others simply show a speed alert. Most car GPS devices project the **full-route display** as a line on the map from your existing position through to your destination.

Lane guidance informs you when to move to the exit lane and clearly displays complex multi-lane maneuvers.

Walking mode allows you to plot a route for pedestrians, such as walking the wrong way down one-way streets or taking a short-cut through a park.

Text to speech (TTS) The GPS device announces the street name, so you know when to turn without having to glance at the screen. Some models provide more than one voice option, which can be handy if you don't like the default voice.

Remote trip planning allows you to run through your driving route in virtual mode before you even get into the car (also known as A-B routing).

Some units can communicate with **Bluetooth**-enabled mobile phones, allowing you to make hands-free phone calls and call directly by selecting certain POIs.

Some units can show photo images, play some video formats and even display text documents as an e-book.

Trip recording takes note of your travels and saves the information to post online in an application such as Google Earth.

Mac compatibility If you want to use your car GPS on a computer, all models on test provide some functionality on a Windows (XP or Vista) machine. However, the Navman, Mio and ALDI models do not offer support for Apple Mac OS X.

SUNA This allows you to collect live traffic information out of the box with a SUNA subscription integrated into the car GPS unit or as an optional extra.

Memory cards may contain the latest maps, and can also store images, music and video files.





STORY MARTHA PSIROUKIS

Hot fun in the summertime

Cooking outdoors on balmy summer days with these barbecues leaves your kitchen comfortably cool.

NUTSHELL

>> Seven four-burner barbecues on test, ranging from \$599 to \$899. All have a hood, trolley and side burner.
>> Barbecuing is an enjoyable way to cook, and with the added benefit of a side burner, you can prepare an entire meal outdoors.

Using a hooded gas barbecue as an outdoor oven in summer will help keep your kitchen cooler, saving you energy and money on cooling bills. It's more environmentally friendly than using an electric oven, and most barbecues on test can also be converted to natural gas. Cooking with the hood down traps the heat and circulates it through natural convection (while conserving gas and

speeding up the cooking time), producing a mouth-watering, distinctly barbecued flavour.

Most people tend to move food around the barbecue to cooler or warmer spots, which can compensate for uneven heating. However, in most cases you can't compensate for poor ease of use, such as smoke and heat being directed into your face. So, although cooking performance is important, some ease of use factors may turn a pleasurable activity into a horrible one. All models in our What to Buy list perform well for both ease of use and performance. >

HOW WE TEST

Cooking performance Our home economist, Fiona Mair (below), cooks steak and sausages with the hood open, turning them once only. This fairly severe test is to check how evenly the hotplate reaches and maintains a high temperature, and how well it controls flare-ups. At home you'd probably compensate for cool and hot spots by moving the food around.

She cooks a whole chicken and marinated wings with the hood down on a rack/tray in the centre of the plates, again turning only once. The roasting assesses the performance at moderate temperatures over a period of time, while the marinated wings need a low temperature so the marinade doesn't burn. Cooking in this way is comparable to cooking in an oven.

She also cooks a beef and vegetable stir-fry to gauge the side burner's ability to reach and maintain a high temperature.

Ease of use Fiona looks for easy access when moving and turning the food, and notes any discomfort, such as smoke blowing into the face. She also looks at moving and cleaning the barbecue, how easy the controls are to use, and how easily the gas bottle can be fitted.



WHAT TO BUY

Sunbeam GB4110 (A)	\$799
Beefmaster BM4CSCPE	\$549
Masport Maestro Deluxe	\$849

(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Cooking performance score (%)
Sunbeam GB4110 (A)	84	88
Beefmaster BM4CSCPE	81	80
Masport Maestro Deluxe	79	83
Matador Director Max 4	74	75
Jackaroo Professional Platinum ST4	73	72
Everdure Norfolk Series II	70	71
Beefeater 900 Series 4 Burner	67	67

USING THE TABLE All models on test have: a thermometer in the hood, side table, side burners and a cupboard on the trolley. All pass barbecue stability, hood stability, tilt test and gas leak tests. **Scores** The overall score is made up of: Cooking performance 60%; Ease of use 40%. **Cooking performance** The scores for cooking steak, sausages

CHOICE ONLINE

Go to www.choice.com.au/barbecues for tips on how to get the most out of your barbecue.

WHAT TO BUY



84% Sunbeam GB4110

PRICE \$799

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for roasting, cooking marinated wings and a stir-fry.
- Very good for cooking sausages.
- Good for cooking steaks.
- Good access to food – food warmer swings out of way.
- Side panels protect the food and flame from drafts.
- Char-grill plate is split for easy lifting and cleaning.
- Side burner has a cover that can be used as a side table when burner is not in use.

BAD POINTS

- Side table handles are a little uncomfortable to grip.
- Stainless steel controls can be difficult to grip if they become greasy (there's no crossbar).
- Labelling on controls is faint.
- Stainless steel exterior is harder to clean.
- Fat tray can only be removed from the back of the BBQ.



81% Beefmaster BM4CSCPE

PRICE \$549

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for roasting and cooking marinated wings.
- Very good for cooking a stir-fry.
- Good for cooking steaks.
- Side burner has a cover that can be used as a side table when burner is not in use.
- Side table has a comfortable handle for moving.
- Very good controls are easy to use.
- Good access to food – food warmer swings out of way.
- Exterior is easy to wipe over.
- Char-grill plate is split for easy lifting and cleaning.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK for cooking sausages.
- No side panels to protect food and flame from drafts.



79% Masport Maestro Deluxe

PRICE \$849

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for roasting and cooking marinated wings.
- Very good for cooking sausages.
- Good for cooking steaks.
- Good access to food – food warmer swings out of way.
- Side panels protect food and flame from drafts.
- Very good controls are easy to use.
- Lowest gas consumption.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK for cooking stir-fry.
- Side burner cover can't be used as a side table.
- Battery is needed for ignition.
- Stainless steel exterior surface is harder to clean.

FEATURES					SPECIFICATIONS			
	Warming rack	Reversible cooking hotplate	Castors / wheels	Side tray	Natural gas option	Gas consumption (kg / hr)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Contact
tronics	✓	✓	4 / -	✓	ns	0.12	115 x 170 x 60	www.sunbeam.com.au
o (B)	✓	✓	2 / 2	✓	✓	0.12	115 x 170 x 65	www.barbecuesgalore.com.au
tronics	✓	✓	2 / 2	✓	ns	0.09	115 x 160 x 65	www.masport.com.au
o (B)	✓	✓	4 / -	✓ (C)	✓	0.11	120 x 180 x 60	www.bunnings.com.au
o		✓	4 / -	✓	✓	0.14	117 x 162 x 63	www.k-mart.com.au
tronics	✓	✓	4 / -	✓	✓	0.12	125 x 160 x 60	www.everdure.com.au
o	✓		2 / 2	✓	✓	0.15	115 x 165 x 60	www.beefeaterbbq.com

ated chicken wings, roast chicken, and stir fry on the side burner are weighted equally. **Ease of use** is made up of: Ease of cooking 40%; Ignition, Using the controls and Cleaning, 20% each. **Features** See What to Look For, page 56. **Gas consumption** This is measured with all burners on high over a one-hour period. **Price** Recommended retail, as of October 2009. **TABLE NOTES** ns Not stated. **(A)** Discontinued, may still be available in some stores. **(B)** With jet ignition flame. **(C)** Can be folded down to save space when not in use.

ABOUT THE REST

The **Matador** and **Jackeroo** models score reasonably well for cooking performance and ease of use, and are good cheaper options. But the Matador's thermometer isn't accurate, while the Jackeroo's ignition is difficult to light and it has no food warmer.

The **Everdure** also has a reasonable cooking score, whereas the **Beefeater's** is just OK, but both direct smoke into your face when the hood is up. The Beefeater's thermometer isn't accurate and its side tables have no handles so they're uncomfortable to grip when moving the barbecue.

Look for enamel or stainless steel hotplates if you live in a coastal area, as cast iron hotplates are more likely to rust.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

HOODED GAS BARBECUE

A **large cooking area**, preferably half grill and half hotplate. Cast iron hotplates are more susceptible to rust; if you live in a coastal area, enamel or stainless steel hotplates are recommended.

Easy access to the entire cooking area; the warming racks on some models can get in the way.

The **hood opening angle** should tilt back far enough not to blow smoke into your face.

An **in-hood thermometer** is useful when cooking with the hood down, but we've found they're often not accurate, so you're better off buying an oven thermometer for serious roasting.

Handles should be far enough from the hot lid panel behind that you don't burn your hand. The **fat tray** should be easy to remove and replace and be self-centring to catch all the fat.

Controls should be clearly labelled and have positive stops at both the low and high positions so you don't accidentally turn a burner off when adjusting the heat. They should also be easy to grip and turn. Etched labels on stainless steel are better than painted ones as they're less likely to be removed over time or when cleaning. **Ignition** types are usually piezo or electronic. Piezo is where you press a button or one of the gas knobs and it generates a spark to ignite the gas. Some piezo systems direct a jet of flame into the burners to light them more reliably. Electronic ignition uses a battery to create a spark.

Natural gas conversion kits can be bought to convert LPG connections to natural gas ones, but you may need to specify the fuel type before buying as some models can't be converted later. See the table, page 54, for details.

Side panels protect the food and flame from drafts on windy days.

A **double-skin hood** reduces the external hood temperature and protects your hands and fingers from getting sizzled.

Hood closure resistance prevents the hood accidentally banging shut on a windy day.

Exterior finishes include painted surfaces, vitreous enamel and stainless steel. Paint is the cheapest finish and can scratch or flake off over time. Vitreous enamel is tougher and more durable. Stainless steel is also very durable but can discolour when heated, and may require extra cleaning as it shows smudges and fingerprints more readily than other surfaces.

SIDE BURNERS

A **recessed burner** helps protect the flame from drafts. None on test are fully protected, but the Sunbeam, Beefmaster, Jackaroo and Beefeater side burners are best.

A **double or triple ring burner** generally means a higher heat setting, making it more versatile and a better performer. All except the Masport performed well in our stir-fry test.

A **cover** over a recessed side burner that doubles as a side tray is handy for extra useable space.

TROLLEY

Wheels or castors are useful if you want to move your barbecue around. Most of these models are very heavy and hard to move without them. If you buy a model with only two wheels, check it's not too heavy to lift at one end, and if it doesn't have handles, make sure there aren't any sharp edges where you grip it.

Material Wooden trolleys need their bolts tightened regularly, whereas metal trolleys don't seem to have this problem. Stainless steel trolleys may be fashionable and durable but are harder to clean. Watch out for rusting with some metal trolleys, as some metals will rust in certain environments, such as near the beach. The **height of the trolley/barbecue plates** should be comfortable for you.

Large side trays are handy for storing food and utensils while cooking.

Assembling trolleys can be difficult and time-consuming, so a preassembled one or a more basic design may suit you better, or you may want to pay the retailer to assemble it for you.



STORY REBECCA GATTO

Kids in the kitchen

Some gadgets aren't worth the effort or expense.

Novelty gadgets are a good way to get children away from the TV and into the kitchen. And Christmas holidays are a great time to do it. CHOICE tested four appliances marketed heavily to children and found they all still require adult supervision. Your child can learn to follow the recipe and create the mixture by themselves, however the appliances' hot cooking surfaces or use of a microwave mean an adult should oversee the process from there.

Not the real thing

These gadgets make slightly healthier alternatives to similar store-bought treats as they require very little oil for cooking, but their products don't taste like the real deal. The Kambrook and Sunbeam doughnut makers make baked doughnuts, whereas true doughnuts use yeast to create texture and are deep-fried.

The Girl Gourmet makes only one cupcake at a time and the manufacturer recommends using only their cake and icing mixes, making it a very expensive toy. The cupcakes have an artificially sweet taste and need to be eaten immediately before they become dry and hard. Our eight-year-old tester found it easy to use without help from her mum, but said she wouldn't use the cake mixes provided, preferring instead to make cupcakes in the oven and use the toy for decorating only.

The Breville makes party pies perfectly in six to eight minutes, allowing you to experiment with sweet and savoury flavours, but it doesn't perform as well for cupcakes, as getting the right amount of batter into the wells is fiddly. To read How We Test, go to www.choice.com.au/kidskitchen. ■

PROFILES



Breville BPI280 Party Pie Creations ★★☆☆☆

PRICE \$70

GOOD POINTS

- Very good for making party pies.
- Easy to use and clean the non-stick surface.
- Can also make quiches, muffins and cupcakes.
- Comes with a pie cutter and pie press.
- Makes eight party pies or cupcakes per batch.
- Cord wrap.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK for making cupcakes.
- Fiddly to get the right amount of batter into the wells so the mixture rises enough for browning.



Kambrook Doughnut Factory KDM1 ★★☆☆☆

PRICE \$45

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to use and clean the non-stick surface.
- Comparatively cheap.
- Cord wrap.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK for making doughnuts.
- The hot plate is exposed around the edge and becomes dangerously hot.
- Tastes like a cupcake rather than a doughnut.
- Fiddly to get the right amount of batter into the wells so the mixture rises enough for browning.
- Makes only six bite-sized doughnuts per batch.
- Temperature fluctuates, causing uneven browning.



Sunbeam Sprinkles Doughnut Maker DM3200 ★★☆☆☆

PRICE \$45

GOOD POINTS

- Good result for making doughnuts.
- Easy to use and clean the non-stick surface.
- Makes five good-sized doughnuts per batch.
- Comparatively cheap.
- Cord wrap.

BAD POINTS

- Tastes like a cupcake rather than a doughnut.
- Fiddly to get the right amount of batter into the wells so the mixture rises enough for browning.



Girl Gourmet Cupcake Maker ★☆☆☆☆

PRICE PAID \$100 (Refills: \$15 for pack of nine)

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to use.
- Instructions are easy to understand for children aged eight and older.

BAD POINTS

- Poor result for making cupcakes.
- Cake and frosting taste very sweet and artificial.
- Makes only one cupcake per mix.
- Need to purchase refill cake and frosting mixes.
- Very expensive toy.



STORY BEN ROSSETTO

Out of the icebox

Not all eskies are equally cool.

NUTSHELL

>> Nine 60L eskies – mostly serious iceboxes for camping – on test, priced between \$99 and \$399.
>> When filled with ice and drinks, some of the heavier eskies on test will require two people to carry them.

DID YOU KNOW?

"Esky" is a common Australian term for coolers and iceboxes, but is actually a trademark name now owned by Coleman.

CHOICE ONLINE

For What to Look For details and to read how members get the best performance from their eskies, go to www.choice.com.au/esky

If you need a place to store cold food and drinks outside this summer, an esky is essential. Our results revealed some dramatic differences in the nine models on test. Ice lasted twice as long – just over four days – in the best-performing model than in the worst, which is well short of some manufacturers' claims of five to 10 days. Our measurements did not correlate with manufacturer's claims, probably because each manufacturer's test method varies. Their claims may not be comparable or based on realistic usage.

Wall thickness and construction materials also contribute to performance. Eskies typically have a protective hard shell, such as fibreglass, polyethylene or other plastics surrounding a foam material that provides the insulation. The foam varies, from high-quality household refrigerator foam in the wall base and lid, to simpler foams and just air in the lid.

Although our top-performing model will keep food cold longer, a cheaper model may be good enough for parties,

picnics or shopping trips. In more demanding scenarios, such as camping, you will be able to compensate by packing more ice or refilling the esky more often. At \$4 for a 5kg bag of ice, you can buy a lot for \$300 – the difference between the best performer and cheapest model on test. ■

HOW WE TEST

Performance Our testers, Ben Rossetto and Geoff Day, load each model with cold bottles (one 750ml bottle per 5L of the eskies' internal volume) and ice (one-quarter internal volume when melted), then measure how long it takes for the ice to melt in a 32°C room. They then measure the time for the contents to warm from 10°C to 20°C.

Ease of use They assess the ease of loading, transporting and cleaning the eskies.

Product	Performance				Features				Specifications			
	Overall score (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Days to melt ice	Fits 2L bottle upright	Fits wine bottle upright	Wheels	Non-slip feet	Basket	Dry ice compatible	External dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Internal dimensions (cm, H x W x D)
Brand / model (in rank order)												
Downunder DU 62L	83	87	75	4.1	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	45 x 73 x 47	32 x 59.5 x 32.5
Evakool E060	72	72	71	3.7	✓	✓			(B)	✓	43 x 71 x 45	32 x 59 x 32
Coleman Xtreme Series 6262A707G	70	67	76	3.2	✓	✓	✓			✓ (C)	44 x 79 x 41	31 x 65 x 29.5
Tropical Iceboxes T62	70	72	66	3.4	✓	✓		✓		✓	47 x 74 x 49	33 x 59 x 32
Xtracool 60L Premium Cube	61	56	71	2.4	✓	✓				✓	47 x 59 x 47	36 x 46.5 x 34.5
Icematate by Evakool IM064	60	56	68	2.8	✓	✓			✓		45 x 65 x 44	35.5 x 51.5 x 33.5
Waco Coolice WCI-60 (A)	60	59	63	2.8	✓	✓		✓		✓	42 x 70 x 44	30.5 x 56 x 33
Thermos 7860M/51-57L	60	56	69	2.2	✓	✓				✓ (C)	43 x 65 x 40	37 x 55.5 x 32
Willow 55lt Wheelie Cooler	51	41	74	1.6	✓	✓	✓				42 x 57 x 40	36 x 51 x 32

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is comprised of performance (70%) and ease of use (30%). **Days to melt ice** See How we Test, above. **Features** See www.choice.com.au/esky for more. All models on test have drains and hinged lids. **External dimensions** Our measurements for the smallest box that fits around the esky. **Internal dimensions** Our measurements used to calculate the volume. **Price** Recommended or average retail, as of October 2009.

WHAT TO BUY



83% Downunder DU 62L

PRICE \$385

GOOD POINTS

- The only very good model on test.
- Easy to use.
- Has a basket and non-slip feet.
- Dry-ice compatible.

BAD POINTS

- Rubber latches break easily.
- Comparatively heavy.



72% Evakool E060

PRICE \$399

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to use.
- Dry-ice compatible.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.



70% Tropical ICEBOXES T62

PRICE \$263

GOOD POINTS

- Has non-slip feet.
- Dry-ice compatible.

BAD POINTS

- Very bulky considering storage volume.
- Bulky lid overhang and width makes carrying difficult.
- Comparatively heavy.

BEST
BUY

70% Coleman Xtreme Series 6262A707G

PRICE \$180

GOOD POINTS

- Easy to use.
- Easy to move on a smooth surface.
- Lid has internal recesses and cup holders on top.
- Comparatively cheap.

BAD POINTS

- Lid does not have a separate latch and requires significant effort to lift and close properly.
- Very bulky considering storage volume.
- Width makes carrying difficult for one person.
- Handles and hinges appear comparatively flimsy.
- Not fully dry-ice compatible.

ABOUT THE REST

The **Xtracool** is easy to use but very bulky. While its lid overhang protects the handles, it also makes carrying difficult.

The **Icemate** has a basket that aids access to lower items but the handles are integrated into the cabinet and offer only finger slots to grasp. It is also not easy to tie down.

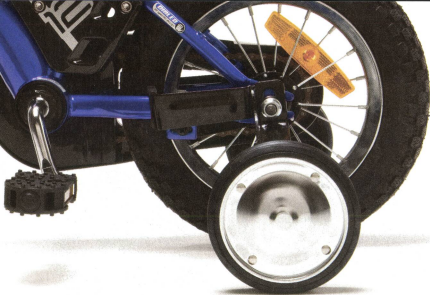
The **Waeco** is very easy to clean, but tall bottles don't fit vertically and its lid does not open a full 90°. Its handles are integrated into the cabinet and offer only finger slots to grasp. It has no tie-down points.

The **Thermos** is cheaper but the lid is domed and items stored near the top are unlikely to stay very cold. When empty, it tips over when the lid is opened. Its handles and hinges appear comparatively flimsy.

The **Willow** is cheaper, easy to use, has compact wheels and a tall towing handle, but only borderline performance. Its handles and hinges appear comparatively flimsy.

Contact	Price (\$)
www.downundericeboxes.com	385
www.evakool.com.au	399
www.colemanaustralia.com.au	180
www.downundericeboxes.com	263
www.xtracool.com.au	150
www.evakool.com.au	279
www.waeco.com.au	249
02 9756 4311	99
www.willow.com.au	100

LE NOTES (A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some
ss. (B) Available at an extra cost. (C) Direct contact with liner is not
mmended.



STORY MATTHEW STEEN

Junior wheelies

None of the bikes we put to the test completely pass the safety standard, but some are still worth buying.

states. Wherever we found missing reflectors or bells, the manufacturer told us this is the responsibility of the dealer, as all except 30cm bikes are supplied with these items when they leave the factory – so insist on having them fitted.

Some of the bikes are also missing sections in their manuals concerning maintenance, which means you'll need to take them to a bike shop if they need adjustment or fixing, adding more to the running costs. This missing information may include not listing the pressure for the tyres, not including chain tensioning details or a lack of wet weather safety information – all of which could be easily added as a single page for specific models. After our test we contacted the ACCC about the failure of these bikes to meet the standard.

Flat-pack madness

We had to assemble five of the bikes on test – cheaper ones from department stores that come in a flat pack containing a partly assembled bike. If you're planning to buy one of these, we suggest you put aside longer than just the recommended time for assembly (25 minutes for one model) – a couple of extra hours will compensate for incomplete or confusing instructions. You may need to use your own tools or take it to a bike shop that will assemble it for about \$50. Even so, it may still need further adjustment. Log on to www.choice.com.au/kidsbikes for the basics. ■

NUTSHELL

>> On test: 13 children's bikes of varying sizes, priced between \$54 and \$299.

>> None of these bikes completely meets the mandatory Australian safety standard.

That first bike ride is an event to always remember. So, when you're buying a new bike for your child, you expect it to be safe, easy to assemble (if necessary) and maintain.

However, CHOICE found many of these elements lacking in some of the models on test, and all failed at least part of the mandatory Australian standard. We also asked two experts to assess the bikes for details not covered by the standard, such as quality of construction and other components.

Children's bike sizes are based on their wheel diameter, usually stated in imperial and/or metric measurement on the wheel itself. On test are four 30cm (12in), five 40cm (16in) and four 50cm (20in) bikes. Sizes are generally appropriate for certain age groups (see Sizes and Ages, opposite), but will also depend on your child and their needs.

Below standard

All bikes in our test failed the standard in some way, ranging from incomplete manuals or missing light reflectors to handgrip brakes being too wide for small hands. All have some kind of braking mechanism, but some are more poorly implemented than others. This doesn't necessarily mean the bikes should not be purchased, but any bike missing reflectors or a warning device such as a bell will require them to be fitted – by law in some

MEET THE EXPERTS

Simon Hayes is the editor of *Bicycling Australia* and is releasing a book on where to ride in Sydney. **Donna Meehan** is an accredited *AustCycle* Provider, and runs her own business that provides safe cycling skills training and assists companies in developing sustainable commuting programs for their employees.



HOW WE TEST

Our tester, James Thomson, tests all bikes against the mandatory Australian Standard, ASNZS 1927:1998. These tests cover many elements, including instruction, safety and design requirements. Smaller children's bikes (such as 30cm) aren't covered under this standard; however, we believe they should be, so we've included them in testing. We also had two experts assess the bikes on detail such as construction, wheels, components, brakes and value for money (see left).

WHAT TO BUY



30cm 12"
Trek Jet 12



40cm 16" Dunlop
Jumbo 7291760

PRICE \$229

GOOD COMMENTS

- "Solid and well assembled construction."
- "Well designed spokes and wheels."
- "Mudguards."

BAD COMMENTS

- "Poor quality pedals."

PRICE \$98

GOOD COMMENTS

- "Good quality components all well adjusted."
- "Mount for basket or other accessories."

BAD COMMENTS

- "Small brake pads."
- "Basic seat."

ABOUT THE REST

All bikes "worth considering" pass key facets of the standard, but fail in areas such as incomplete or insufficient manual instructions. Neither the **Trek Jet 12** nor the **Giant** comes with any manual or instructions, so check with the retailer to make sure one comes with it. The **Avanti**, **Bauer** and **Raleigh** bikes don't detail chain tension information fully. The **Huffy** models don't give the tyre pressure in their manuals. The **Avanti** and **Bauer** models don't include information on brake adjustment. None of the **Raleighs** or the **Trek Jet 20's** manuals include hand grip warnings. The **Southern Star's** manual doesn't include enough braking information.

SIZES & AGES

These sizes are suitable for these ages:
30cm 3-5yrs
40cm 6-8yrs
50cm 9-11yrs

CHOICE ONLINE

For What to Look For when buying a child's bike, including a video, go to www.choice.com.au/kidsbike

Product		Safety Tests				Features				Specifications		
Brand / model (in alphabetical order within sizes)	Wheel size	Passed reflectors test	Passed bell test	Passed handbrake grip test	Passed fasteners test	Brakes	Frame material	Mudguards	Padding	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price (\$)
Recommended												
Trek Jet 12	30cm / 12"	✓	✓	✓	✓	BP, FB	Steel	✓	✓	10.3	www.trekbikes.com.au	229
Dunlop Jumbo 7291760	40cm / 16"	✓	✓	✓	✓	BP, FB	Steel		✓	11.2	www.bigw.com.au	98
Worth Considering												
Malvern Star Blast MI0292	30cm / 12"		✓	na	✓	BP	Steel		✓	8.6	www.malvernstar.com.au	150
Raleigh Bella Push	30cm / 12"		✓	na	✓	BP	Steel		✓	9.4	www.raleighbikes.com	200
Avanti MXR	40cm / 16"	✓	✓	✓	✓	BP, FB	Aluminium		✓	10.4	www.avantibikes.com	200
Bauer Rock It	40cm / 16"	✓	✓	✓	✓	BP, FB	Aluminium	✓		10.4	www.bauerbikes.co.nz	190
Huffy ZRX-16 7225161	40cm / 16"	✓	✓	✓	✓	BP, FB, RB	Steel		✓	12.1	www.bigw.com.au	138
Raleigh Gravity 16	40cm / 16"	✓	✓	✓	✓	BP, FB	Steel		✓	12.5	www.raleighbikes.com	170
Giant Method 03	50cm / 20"	✓	✓	✓	✓	FB, RB	Steel			12.6	www2.giant-bicycles.com	299
Raleigh Gravity 20	50cm / 20"	✓	✓	✓	✓	BP, FB	Steel		✓	14.0	www.raleighbikes.com	200
Southern Star Sonic Boom	50cm / 20"	✓	✓	✓	✓	BP, FB	Steel		✓	11.3	www.kmart.com.au	104
Trek Jet 20	50cm / 20"	✓	✓	✓	✓	BP, FB, RB	Steel	✓	✓	11.3	www.trekbikes.com.au	299
Not Recommended												
Huffy Scram (A)	30cm / 12"			✓	✓	FB	Steel		✓	5.6	www.kmart.com.au	54

USING THE TABLE Recommended These bikes pass key safety aspects, but are missing some minor detail from their manuals. **Worth considering** Most of these bikes passed the safety aspects we tested, but are missing more detail from their instructions. **Not recommended** Experts strongly advised against buying. **Price** Recommended retail, as of November 2009.

TABLE NOTES na Not applicable. (A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores. (BP) Back pedal brake. (FB) Front rim brake. (RB) Rear rim brake.

Finger on the pulse

Make the most of your training with a heart rate monitor that's easy to use.

CHOICE ONLINE

For more on exercise and how to get the best out of a heart rate monitor, go to www.choice.com.au/heartmonitors

Hear rate monitors measure your heart's beats per minute (BPM) and are used to indicate its response to exercise. They can be useful for a variety of reasons – athletes use them extensively for training and hobbyists can use them for a rough guide to their workout.

All the monitors on test scored 100% for accuracy, so we've rated them on their ease of use. They all have a chest belt that transmits your heart rate and a watch that displays it. It takes a little while to transmit a reliable signal at first, as it records BPM over a number of seconds.

The adjustable chest belt has two built-in electrodes that need to be against bare skin. They need to be wet to improve contact with your skin, but during a workout sweat keeps the connection strong. Their design and

comfort vary considerably, so try them on before buying.

The watch often comes with extra features, such as calorie counting and lap timing. Typically, the more features, the more it costs. Most of the watches are either splashproof or water-resistant, and any models claiming to work submerged come with a warning that there may be interference with the signal.

The batteries in some watches and chest belts can last up to several years, depending on how often they're used. The chest belt will also deteriorate faster than the watch. Replacing batteries costs between \$10 to \$35 and the chest belt between \$20 to \$120.

Thanks to GE Healthcare and the University of Sydney Faculty of Health Sciences for the loan of their equipment to test the monitors' performance. ■

PRODUCT	EASE OF USE	FEATURES										SPECIFICATIONS	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Ease of use score (%)	Countdown mode	Maximum heart rate	Calories burnt	Recovery mode	Record laps	Alarm	Heart touch function	Vibration alert	Exercise profiles	Contact		Price (\$)
Oregon Scientific SE211 (A)	79	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	1	www.oregonscientific.com.au		149
Cateye MSC-HR10	78	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			1	www.cateye.com		209
Cateye MSC-HR20	78	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			3	www.cateye.com		239
Kathmandu T0654	78						✓			1	www.kathmandu.com.au		110
Oregon Scientific SE300 (A)	77	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	3	www.oregonscientific.com.au		249
Timex Ironman Road Trainer T5K214	75	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			6	www.timex.com		299
Oregon Scientific SE102 (A)	73		✓	✓			✓		✓	1	www.oregonscientific.com.au		100
Timex Ironman Triathlon T5F001	72	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			8	www.timex.com		399
Timex T5G971	72		✓	✓	✓					1	www.timex.com		169
Timex T5J031	72	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			6	www.timex.com		259
Polar RS300X	69		✓			✓	✓		✓	4	www.pursuit-performance.com.au		299
Polar FS1	68							✓		1	www.pursuit-performance.com.au		129
Polar FS3C	68		✓					✓		1	www.pursuit-performance.com.au		149
Polar RS100	66		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		1	www.pursuit-performance.com.au		249
Suunto T1	65		✓	✓		✓	✓			3	www.amersports.com.au		180
Polar F4	63		✓	✓			✓	✓		1	www.pursuit-performance.com.au		199
Suunto T3C	62		✓			✓	✓			3	www.amersports.com.au		350
Suunto T1C	59		✓			✓	✓			3	www.amersports.com.au		230

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall ease of use score is made up of: Screen quality: 30%; Monitor controls: 30%; Set-up: 25%; Replacing batteries: 10%; Instructions: 5%. **Price** Recommended retail, as of October 2009. **TABLE NOTES (A)** Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores.

WHAT TO BUY

79% Oregon Scientific SE211**PRICE \$149**
GOOD POINTS

- Good instructions, but very small writing.
- Watch is easy to set up.
- Very good screen.
- Buttons are very easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Watch battery fiddly to replace.

**78%** Cateye MSC-HR10**PRICE \$209**
GOOD POINTS

- Excellent instructions.
- Watch is easy to set up.
- Very good screen.
- Buttons are easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Very small writing on buttons.

**78%** Cateye MSC-HR20**PRICE \$239**
GOOD POINTS

- Excellent instructions.
- Watch is easy to set up.
- Very good screen.
- Buttons are easy to use

BAD POINTS

- Control buttons have dark, small writing on black background.

**78%** Kathmandu T0654**PRICE \$110**
GOOD POINTS

- Watch is easy to set up.
- Very good screen.
- Buttons are very easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Borderline instructions in manual, very small writing.
- Watch battery fiddly to replace.
- No average heart rate display.
- Not many features.



BEST BUY

77% Oregon Scientific SE300**PRICE \$249**
GOOD POINTS

- Good instructions, but very small writing.
- Watch is easy to set up.
- Good screen.
- Buttons are very easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing to mention.



ABOUT THE REST

All the **Timex** and **Polar** models (except the Polar RS300X) have poor battery replacement scores as they have to be done by a Polar service centre or jeweller (for Timex).

The **Oregon Scientific SE102** is a good price, but not as easy to use as our What to Buy models.

The **Suunto** watches have small writing and the screen contrast makes them difficult to read.

WHAT ABOUT ALDI?



CHOICE receives many requests to review ALDI products, so we tested the Crane Sports F38 monitor (\$30), which rated equal-best.

We contacted ALDI, who confirmed it was a special only, and will not be available in the future.

HOW WE TEST

Ease of use Our tester, Peter Horvath, assesses each heart rate monitor's instructions, set-up, screen quality, battery replacement and controls.

Performance We use a GE Dinamap ProCare vital signs monitor to check resting heart rate against each heart rate monitor's response and an ECG simulator to test the monitors at 60 BPM, 90 BPM, 120 BPM, 150 BPM and 180BPM.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Watch screen should be relatively easy to read with a large display, good contrast, large numbers and text.

Maximum heart rate By entering your age and/or other variables, most monitors can determine a maximum heart rate so you can set boundaries in your routine.

A **backlight** makes it easier to see the watch screen in low light.

Batteries should be easy to remove and replace, without needing a service centre or jeweller.

Chest belt should be easily adjustable.

Countdown mode for timing your workouts.

Calorie counter to indicate how many calories are being burnt off.

Recovery mode shows the time to recover from exercise; the quicker your recovery, the fitter you are.

Record lap function so you can compare lap times.

Heart touch function shows your BPM when you place the watch against the chest belt.

Vibration alerts instead of, or in addition to, an audible alarm.

User profiles allow multiple users to wear the monitor, recording the age, gender, height and weight of each.



RECALLS & BANS

There are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au, or call the ACCC's Product Safety Policy section on 02 6243 1262. Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer.

DUMMY Froggie, on the advice of the NSW Office of Fair Trading, has recalled **Pinkie Baby's Best Need and Pinkie "Oh, my first kiss" dummies**. They were distributed at retail outlets in NSW between January 2007 and September 2009, with item numbers D014 and D006.

The problem They don't comply with the requirements of the mandatory Australian standard, and the teat may tear and detach, creating a choking hazard.

What to do Remove from children. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 02 9755 2218.

DUMMY Gift Rapt, on the advice of the NSW Office of Fair Trading, has recalled **Potato AQIN Plastic dummies**. They were sold at Gift Rapt between October 2008 and June 2009.

The problem They don't comply with the requirements of the mandatory Australian standard, and the teat may detach, creating a choking hazard.

What to do Remove from children. Return them to Gift Rapt for a refund.

DUMMY Hornsby Shopping Paradise, on the advice of the NSW Office of Fair Trading, has recalled **New Apple Baby Series of Infant Necessities baby dummies**. They were distributed at retail outlets in NSW between June 2007 and June 2009, and have item number BW2553.

The problem They don't comply with the requirements of the mandatory Australian standard, and the teat may detach, creating a choking hazard.

What to do Remove from children. Return them to Hornsby Shopping Paradise for a refund.

PLAYPEN Target has recalled **Wotabot Toys Sesame St and Thomas the Tank Engine Musical Activity Playpen**. The Sesame St playpen has barcode number 939101001663, while the Thomas the Tank Engine Playpen has barcode number 939101001625. They were available for sale between June 2009 and October 2009 at Target stores.

The problem Humidity has caused the front label sticker to bubble and peel, which if torn off could pose a choking hazard to young children.

What to do Dispose of the front flat panel, and contact Wotabot Toys on 03 9381 0037 or email sales@wotabot.com.au to obtain a replacement, or return it to Target for a refund.

BAZOOKA FROM SHOWBAG Bensons Trading Company and Veritas Marketing has recalled a toy **bazooka**, sold as an option with the Idiot and Mega Sumo showbags at the Royal Melbourne Show between 17-22 September 2009, the Royal Queensland Show between 6-15 August 2009, and the Qantas Adelaide Show between 4-12 September 2009.

The problem A faulty pump mechanism may pose a hazard.

What to do Return the bazooka to Bensons Trading Company Ltd, 39 Swann Drive, Derrimut, Vic 3030, to obtain a refund of \$5, or for more information call 03 9369 9929, 9am-5pm, Monday-Friday, AEST.

STROLLER Bugaboo International has recalled **Bugaboo Bee Stroller**, item codes 54100BL01, 54100K01,

54100Y01, 54100P01, 54100RD01 and 54100ZW01, sold between January 2009 and June 2009.

The problem The brake may fail on one side.

What to do To receive a service set of clip brackets to correct the problem, contact the retailer from where the stroller was purchased, or go to www.bugaboo.com [the news section], or call 02 9091 0322.

BABY RATTLE Cut Price Imports has recalled **Neon BAD BE1 Baby Rattles**, in the following designs: Neon Key Baby Rattle, TOY9206 barcode 9328195051685; Neon Guitar Baby Rattle, TOY9208 barcode 9328195051708; Neon Musical Note Baby Rattle, TOY9209 barcode 9328195051715; Neon Tamborine Baby Rattle, TOY9210 barcode 9328195051722 and Neon Saxophone Baby Rattle, TOY9211 barcode 9328195051739. They were sold at numerous retail outlets.

The problem They don't conform to Australian safety standards.

What to do Remove from the reach of children and return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

CHILDREN'S GARDEN SETTING Sam's Warehouse, Crazy Clark's and Go-Lo has recalled **4pc Setting Garden Children's**, barcode number 933819529017, sold between 21 August 2008 and 14 September 2009.

The problem The chairs do not meet the product safety requirements for children's folding chairs and may pose an entrapment hazard.

What to do Remove the chairs from the reach of children and return the full setting to the place of purchase for a refund.

CUSHIONS Kmart has recalled **Roomates Squishy Cushions**, in the following designs: Barrel Squishie Blue/Red (APN - 9300804996242), Barrel Squishie Pink/Lilac (APN - 9300804996259), Barrel Dot Print Squishie (APN - 9300804996280), Barrel Star Print Squishie (APN - 9300804996297), Heart Squishie Pink/Lilac (APN - 9300804996264) and Heart Dot Print Squishie (APN - 9300804996273).

The problem The outer seams of the cushions may break, causing the polystyrene beads to spill out, posing a choking hazard to young children.

What to do Stop using them and remove from the reach of children. Return them to any Kmart store for a refund, or for more information call 1800 124 125.

HOT WATER BOTTLE Smart Brands, on the advice of the NSW Office of Fair Trading, has recalled **Smartfix 2 Litre Hot Water Bottles**, sold at Franklins stores throughout NSW between March 2008 and August 2009. The affected bottles have the year 08 and 09 stamped on the reverse side of the bottle neck.

The problem The bottle has been identified as having insufficient seam strength and isn't the required thickness, possibly resulting in burns.

What to do Stop using it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 02 9386 9488 during normal working hours.

HOT WATER BOTTLE Cut Price Imports, on the advice of the NSW Office of Fair Trading, has recalled the following **hot water bottles**. They were sold between

March 2007 and August 2009.
1) 2000ml Hot Water Bottle UK Approved, PER5045 barcode 9328195041532

2) Lying High Pile Plush Hot Water Bottle, PER5046 barcode 9328195002625

3) Bear with Jacket Hot Water Bottle, PER5048 barcode 9328195002649

4) Neon High Pile 2000ml Hot Water Bottle, PER5049 barcode 9328195002656

5) Soft Plush Cute Animal Hot Water Bottle, PER5050 barcode 9328195033568

6) 2000ml Soft Fur Hot Water Bottle, PER5051 barcode 9328195033575

7) Fleece Embroidered Hot Water Bottle, PER5052 barcode 9328195033582

8) 2000ml Aussie Flag Hot Water Bottle, PER5053 barcode 9328195041549, and

9) 2000ml Heavy Knit Hot Water Bottle, PER5054 barcode 9328195041556

The problem The 2000ml hot water bottles have been identified as having insufficient seam strength, and aren't the required thickness, possibly resulting in burns. The other hot water bottles have been identified as not having the required thickness.

What to do Stop using them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

THERAPEUTIC Australian Bush Flower Essence has recalled **Calm & Clear Essence Cream**, batch number 19557, expiry date 01/05/11, and **Travel Essence Cream**, batch number 20864, expiry date 27/08/11.

The problem Tests have indicated possible *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, which may cause eye infections or infections of open skin lesions.

What to do Don't use them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 02 9450 1388.

SLIMMING CAPSULES Itawii has recalled **Poria, Poria Extreme and Poria Original Appetite Suppressant Fat Burner Capsules, and Zein Quick Acting Slimming Capsules**.

The problem Subutramine Hydrochloride has been found in some bottles, which may cause mood swings, constipation, increased appetite, racing heartbeats or insomnia.

What to do Don't consume them. Return them to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1300 210 739.

FEEDBACK REQUIRED The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission is currently reviewing the effectiveness of the product recall system within Australia and internationally. The information gathered will be used to make improvements to the system and look at ways of improving the way consumers are informed about product safety issues. If you'd like to have your say, go to www.accc.gov.au and search for 'recalls review'. You'll find short questionnaires for both businesses and consumers.

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A full index, with links to articles, from 2002 onwards can be found at www.choiceextra.com.au (see instructions, below right). **Bold** type indicates a test, survey or trial report, unbold type indicates a feature. * Indicates an update, addition or correction.

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Coffee, ground	Dec/Jan	cheap home	May	tax tips	May	Varicose veins	Jun
Cooktops, gas	Apr	memberships	May			Washing machines	Mar, Aug
Consumer survey	Jul	Hair dryers	Aug	Nanofoods	Mar	Weddings	Dec/Jan
Cordless drills	Sep	Handheld	Aug	Noise-cancelling earplugs	May	Wine	Mar
Cordless kettles	Feb	blenders	Mar	Novelty cooking gadgets	Dec/Jan	awards	Dec/Jan
Cordless phones		GPS	Jun			sparkling	Jun
with answering machine	Aug	vacuums	Apr	Online retailers	Nov	Wireless technology	
without answering machine	Feb	HDMI cables	Apr	Online shop & swap	Sep	Yoghurt, premium	Oct
Cosmetics		Headphones, wireless	Apr	Options trading	Sep	Zoom lenses	Aug

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HARD WORD

This month's best entry comes from G. Dean, who's being driven nuts by a lack of nuts. Thanks also to C. Ellis, R. Swindale, C. Tan, F. & J. Fahy, M. Kneebone, L. Pryer, S. Haynes, the McKenzie family, I. Robertson, J. Flaxman and J. Davidson for their contributions to this month's Hard Word. If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.



**Save
\$40
89⁹⁹**

**Just Like Home
McDonald's Drive-Thru Centre**

Includes 20 accessories, drive-thru window with cash register and a french fry maker complete with bun! **ASAP! Was 129.99**

MACCAS? I PRACTICALLY LIVE THERE!

How many people have an actual McDonald's Drive-Thru in their home?



c. Personalised Wool Socks

No more losing socks!
Available in 3 initials or first name up to 10 characters these socks will stay where they belong!

Made from cotton, spandex and nylon.
One size fits all.

psox **\$19.95**

PULLING THE WOOL...

Perhaps this coton [sic], spandex and nylon "wool" comes from genetically modified sheep?

THEY GO!

Sorted Cans

SAVE \$9.99

\$25

GOL Wheeled Bin With Wheels

WHAT WILL THEY THINK OF NEXT?

Wheels on a wheelie bin are a wheelie good idea. After all, pushing around those wheel-less wheelie bins is pretty hard work.

MATHS DOWN THE TOILET

Unit pricing is only as useful as the accuracy of the maths.

Ingredients:
 Oats (Rolled Oats, Natural Oat Bran, Malted Polenta), Fruit
 28% (Pears, Currants or Malted Raisins, Pine Pine, Peach,
 Apricot, Apple, Desiccated Coconut), Sugar, Almond Flakes
 (1), Sunflower Kernels, Whole Wheat
 *May contain the preservative Sodium Dioxide (220)
 *Where ingredients are not locally available, they are imported

LOWAN
 WORLD BRAND

Fruit & Nut
 Natural Muesli

NO ARTIFICIAL PRESERVATIVES

LOWAN
 WORLD BRAND

Fruit & Nut
 Natural Muesli

750g NET

MAY CONTAIN TRACES OF NUTS

This so-called Fruit and Nut Natural Muesli is in fact 99% nut-free. Meanwhile, with only 0.5% macadamias, calling these "Macadamia Fruit Mince Pies" is a bit of a stretch.

[illegible][illegible]

\$5 A MONTH? THAT'S NOTHING!
At least according to AAPT, whose "great FREE offer" costs "another \$5 per month."